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# 27 Doors

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Behind 27 Doors Hides a World Inspired by Swift and the Grimm Brothers

An Introductory Essay

and an Original Feature-Length Novella, *27 Doors*

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## Abstract

This novella is a fantasy thriller that wants to deal with death and its various shapes throughout a surreal journey, where a superior power challenges the protagonist to face his own guilt, or original sin.

Characters and storylines travel through time to recurring locations, connecting like in a puzzle, where only at the very end they will find the final resolution.

Touching afterlife themes, the story remains as earthly as it can be, letting morality dance with the uncertain context. Religious elements are present, representing the ongoing battle of evil vs. good, all within the personal decisions of a young man forced to enter each one of twenty-seven doors. But at the end, each door will be forced to comply with his innocent soul.

The story doesn't follow a straight pattern at first. The rules of the world change constantly, yet the plot is ignited from the first word.

## Dedication

To Yasmin, for inspiring my return to school. Thank you.

## Acknowledgement

I would first like to thank my thesis director Professor Leo Damrosch of the Extension School/English Literature Faculty at Harvard University. Prof. Damrosch's words of encouragement and thoughtful insights allowed me to find the bravery to finish this work.

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Author

Giacomo La Rosa

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Behind 27 Doors Hides a World Inspired by Swift and the Grimm Brothers.

Writing a novel carries a responsibility toward the readers. It is also a form of respect towards other authors, who have already dealt with specific genres, mastering them to the most subliminal level, and in so doing, defining literature. I am not sure that I paid the necessary respect to those who successfully wrote before me; but certainly, I inherited their curiosity to explore unknown areas of my mind, searching for places of mysterious and inexplicable nature, and making those places the sets of my plot and subplots.

For *27 Doors* --the novella that I am writing- and Jerry --the protagonist-- Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and the original tales of the Brothers Grimm mostly influenced me for their ability to jump from one world to another (Swift), and from one context to another (Grimm).

My novella reflects the ambience and the settings so beautifully written by Grimm, implying an inner darkness and violence that is not always explained, but that is there, and its presence is enough to create a sense of discomfort.

There are four main elements, which link my writing to my inspiring sources:

1) Settings; 2) Structure 3) Motif; and 4) Characters.



## Settings

What I mean by settings is the universe where my characters interact and move. The settings I chose vary in space and time.

In the fantasy-world settings are added as extra layers. They become almost actual characters, hiding the secret force that governs the entire story. Reading from Brothers Grimm's *Hansel and Gretel* I found my first inspiration on how to create such universe. Grimm's forest is more than just a natural habitat, and the two characters are haunted by fear, just like Jerry is haunted every time he walks through a door. In *Hansel and Gretel*, "They walked the whole night and all the next day too from morning till evening, but they did not get out of the forest, and were very hungry, for they had nothing to eat but two or three berries, which grew on the ground." The dark and oppressive world described here mirrors Jerry's world. Neither Hansel and Gretel nor Jerry are allowed to live their adventures like other human beings. They must confront a superior power.

While I reprise Grimm's fairy tales supernatural world, I also try to make the context of my chapters primarily realistic, and this choice can be compared more to Swift. Indeed, once we accept that Lilliputians are smaller than Gulliver, there is nothing unnatural about the characters and the sites that Swift describes (This is a point I learned from Dr. Damrosch in his class *The Rise of the Novel*, and that I found very relevant in terms of thinking through my own work.) I try to imitate this concept by having Jerry interact with other characters, just like people do in every day life. However, if Swift makes the passages from one world to another very straightforward, I chose to make the

transitions between chapters more fantastic, going back to the Brothers Grimm' supernatural.

### Structure

The structure of my novella is inspired by *Gulliver's Travels*, which – in each of its four parts -- introduces different lands without the reader knowing what is coming next. The concept of moving forward, and towards different, apparently disconnected, situations was a valuable inspiration to me. My novella models this movement, and using the structure of linked chapters, allows me to keep the story shifting in the direction it needs to, without necessarily leaving the reader behind –or at least I hope so. *Gulliver's Travels* is disorienting, but not confusing, thus the entering in each one of my doors is also disorienting at times, but never confusing. On this matter Jenny Mezcic's words on the impact of Swift's disorienting worlds in *Gulliver's Travels* provide a good sense of what I experienced:

We as readers thus have no context outside the fiction by which to judge statements about things we cannot recognize and have not experienced. We are left with only the language of fiction; our recognition of the relationship between ideas, form, and expression must all be exercised within the one frame of reference. The extreme difficulties we encounter are engineered deliberately by Swift and may be taken as expressing his insight and indeed foresight, highlighting the power of fiction to persuade and the abuses of

that power. He looks backward towards the romance and forward towards the novel. Gulliver's experiences in books I, II, and III are of fictional worlds that move towards the full utopia of book IV. (861)

In *27 Doors* Jerry is disoriented physically and emotionally because he must learn how to experience life, and the reader experiences the same journey door after door. Jerry never loses his self-confidence, and he grows into a stronger man, and the reader never loses track of the storyline, although it apparently keeps on changing every time.

I also structured my chapters with an eye to Grimm's tales – in which each chapter/tale is almost a story complete in and of itself. From the Grimm's books, I drew on the idea of each chapter being a different kind "tale"–represented, in my novella, by the twenty-seven doors. The chapters, modeled after Grimm's tales, are connected and experienced by the same central protagonist, Jerry. As in Grimm's work, each door reveals a place that is unique and mysterious, but also part of a larger fabric that can only be understood by studying the whole.

I wanted to keep a sense of the unexpected real and relevant throughout the story. My aim was not to achieve a cliffhanger effect, but rather to create a universe where anything could happen at any given time, without following the rules of our every day life.

## Motif

There are four main motifs which run through my work, and which were inspired by Swift and Grimm: the object of the mirror; the theme of magic; the idea of mystery as a governing plot force; and the concept of violence and how violence shapes character.

The object of the mirror. One of the most famous lines written by the Grimm brothers is from *Snow White*, “Mirror, mirror, here I stand. Who is the fairest in the land? (185)” The journey is still long ahead of me, and my final goal is not to make my book the “fairest in the land,” but at least to be admitted in the land.

The image of mirror, quite concretely, inspired the idea of doors in my novella. The doors, just like the mirror in *Snow White*, hold the truth. They reveal to Jerry a world of reality that he can’t grasp and cannot see on his own. Grimms’ mirror becomes my door – as in Grimms, the interaction between object and character is pivotal in revealing the different ways that one might see a particular truth.

The theme of magic. I use Grimms’ trajectory in how I envision the relationship between magic and reality, to unveil different ways that truth can be perceived. The Brothers Grimm let magic run on the background, but they also let non-magical elements interact. Most of the time their protagonists are not magical, but they are still capable of overcoming the dark evil that cornered them. Jerry sees and feels the evil around him, and he is not capable of magic, but he is chosen to prevail over magic. As in a Grimm tale, Jerry must face new experiences in order to grow mature and complete his personal journey. He must face evil in order to reach good.

The idea of mystery as a governing plot force. Each of my “27 doors” contains a

unique mystery and is set in a different environment and moment in time. It begins in behind door 1 with the blood of a homicide that sets the journey through the 27 doors. Yes, there is a superior power in my story, a supernatural force, but this power rarely interferes with any single course of action. It is in the background of the novella – the universe – that the supernatural makes itself manifest.

The concept of violence and how violence shapes character. There is a sense of violence in the world of the Brothers Grimm, in which the often-powerless hero must find his or her own power to succeed. The protagonist of my novella, Jerry, like the Grimms' heroes, also faces violence and blood, and through these experiences develops his character.

Jerry goes through his own Odyssey to find himself stronger and victorious at the end, just like the Grimm knight would defeat a dragon, and conquer the heart of the princess. His journey is graphic and harsh, both emotionally and physically, and in this his world reflects one of the Grimm's tales. However, Jerry's universe is set between 1978 and 2015. There are no witches, but there is evil and darkness. My protagonist must learn how to overcome these forces. He must adapt to the universe around him. He must transform himself from a passive character to an active one.

### Characters

George Orwell gives an interesting interpretation of the way Gulliver sees what goes on around him. Orwell's reasoning is relevant to fully understand how in a story that is based on fantasy, a character's point of view is essential to the reader, so the reader can be part of the journey. This is a lesson that I have applied to my own work in the

crafting of my protagonist, and it is closely linked to the world that each author chooses for his or her characters. Orwell highlights the importance of how a protagonist sees, and the power this has to shape reader reality:

What brings about the recognition is, in the first place, the deeply disturbing spectacle of the Houyhnhnms and the Yahoos. I can find nothing in the text that forces us to look on these two sets of strange creatures in any other light than that in which Gulliver sees them – not, that is, as personified abstractions, but simply as two concrete species of animals: existent species for Gulliver, hypothetical species for us. The contrast he draws between them involves the same pair of antithetical terms (the one positive, the other primitive) that he has been accustomed to use in contrasting men and the other animals. (848)

Because of the fantastical nature of the story, it is impossible to ignore the point of view of the protagonists – Gulliver, or in my novella, Jerry. We need these characters to help us to navigate what is, to us, an impossible world. The reader must trust the heroes, and follow their interpretation of the events without doubting them. Both Gulliver and Jerry are virgins, in a sense – they are exploring uncharted territories. The reader inherits this virginity, he or she – like the central protagonist—must unlearn what they have learned; otherwise they cannot fully appreciate the journey that they are supposed to experience. In a way, I created Jerry as a lens to narrate his world; he doesn't explain it,

but he transmits his emotions. The sense of discomfort impacts the protagonist Jerry, and the psyche of the reader

Jerry does not try to belong; he tries to understand and to survive – how he responds to his universe both shapes and reveals his character. Where Gulliver --when confronted with the universe Swift inflicts on him-- tries to interact and be accepted, Jerry instead fights to succeed. Jerry prevails at the end, mastering his own world based on the experiences gathered in other realities. Gulliver instead loses his sanity, victim of his own world, no more acceptable after having indeed seen other realities.

As the reader travels through the 27 doors with Jerry, the only character that relates to the evil power governing the action is a little devilish dwarf. There is a long history of dwarfs and evil little demons in the Grimms' tales, and I was happy to explore the nature of a similar character and integrate him into my story.

I also used Hansel as a model for the character of Jerry. In the original Grimm's tale, Hansel is portrayed as a force of both violence and potential goodness. Jerry also straddles the lines good and evil, and is forced to decide on what his code of morality will ultimately be.

Grimms write, "Hans went into the stable, cut out all the calves' and sheep's eyes, and threw them in Gretel's face. Then Gretel became angry, tore herself loose and ran away, and was no longer the bride of Hans." The darkness and violence in the passage is palpable. It is here we experience the Grimm's characters at their best. These two lines tell us a love story, and its end; they speak of evil and suffering, morals and decision-making. That sense of right and wrong, and yet writing capability of describing evil so

well, while pointing out the good, without showing the good is a remarkable quality that I tried to replicate.

So, Jerry is put into Hans' situation, and eventually through his actions, Jerry must be able on his own to reach Gretel's sense of morality and act accordingly.

The reader knows that Jerry did something horrible at the beginning of the story, but we don't know what it is until the end, and this ambiguity surrounds Jerry's character, who remains likeable through the novella, but with a shadow haunting him. We don't know what is going to happen next, and what Jerry's final course of action would be.

In a perfect Grimm scenario dark forces plot and rule Jerry's world, and Jerry is passive and active at the same time caught in the middle of it.

The Brothers Grimm wrote in *Rumpelstiltskin* that "To-day I bake, to-morrow brew, the next I'll have the young Queen's child. Ha! Glad am I that no one knew That Rumpelstiltskin I am styled." This is what Jerry is going through; the question is: is he the Queen's child, or is he his killer?

### Genre, Style & Conclusion

While writing *27 Doors*, I often debated what kind of genre I was writing. Ultimately I realized that the series of events narrated must run their course, naturally and credibly. R.S. Cane writing about Swift said that:

It is often argued, at least by people who admit the importance of subject-matter, that a book cannot be 'good' if it expresses a palpably false view



of life. We are told that in our own age, for instance, any book that has genuine literary merit will also be more or less ‘progressive’ in tendency. This ignores the fact that throughout history a similar struggle between progress and reaction has been raging, and that the best books of any age have always been written from several different viewpoints, some of them palpably more false than others. In so far as a writer is a propagandist, the most one can ask of him is that he shall genuinely believe in what he is saying, and that it shall not be something blazingly silly. ... The views that a writer holds must be compatible with sanity, in the medical sense, and with the power of continuous thought: beyond that what we ask of him is talent, which is probably another name for conviction. Swift did not possess ordinary wisdom, but he did possess a terrible intensity of vision, capable of picking out a single hidden truth and then magnifying it and distorting it. The durability of *Gulliver’s Travels* goes to show that, if the force of belief is behind it, a world-view which only just passes the test of sanity is sufficient to produce a great work of art. (849)

I can’t agree more with Cane, whereas the “force of belief” truly supports any great work. Emotion and intellect must be engaged simultaneously in this endeavor. I don’t want to disregard the concept of genre, but genre can be misleading to the true nature of *27 Doors*. I use character and universe to build a trust with the readers, and once that trust is established, the novella comes to life, and the reader is able to experience Jerry’s world fully.

While Gulliver lives in a universe of political allegories and sexual innuendos, and the Brothers Grimm show us a magical world of fantasy, heroes, and villains; I chose to use a thriller theme to create a world for my novella that would interact with the supernatural, and I added the concept of having objects acting as characters, with capabilities of changing the environment with an impact on the evolving of the events.

Furthermore, I use in my story an element that supports Jerry in the journey into his fate, a sort of Divine Providence. I think that Freeman, LD. writing about Gulliver, highlights a very similar concept:

In Swift's Gulliver's Travels, as in Pope's Dunciad there is a kind of supernatural machinery, but a kind that we moderns are likely to overlook. I do not refer to Swift's belief in Providence, which is implicit in the work, but to Fortune. I have counted at least ten occasions upon which Gulliver attributes events to Fortune as though it were a cosmic force. (151)

As far as I am concerned my personal background and personality drove my style in *27 Doors*, but I'd like to quote others when it comes to Grimm and Swift. Thomas O'Neil from the *National Geographic* wrote about the Grimms' inspiration:

[because] Jacob and Wilhelm viewed themselves as patriotic folklorists, not as entertainers of children. They began their work at a time when

Germany, a messy patchwork of fiefdoms and principalities, had been overrun by the French under Napoleon. The new rulers were intent on suppressing local culture. As young, workaholic scholars, single and sharing a cramped flat, the Brothers Grimm undertook the fairy-tale collection with the goal of saving the endangered oral tradition of Germany.

And Freeman, L.D. brings a very valid point on Swift's inspiration is concerned, which finds me in agreement. Freeman writes:

But Gulliver's Travels is more than a story about a fictional hero named Lemuel Gulliver. It is also a tale in -which Swift portrays what for him are the consequences of the attitudes underlying Modernism. Gulliver, as I have pointed out in the previous chapters, exhibits the traits of a Modern—literal-minded ness, a vision limited exclusively to this world, a belief that man has progressed since the time of the Ancients, a thirst for knowledge as its own end. Gulliver comes to embody, like all epic heroes, the ideals of the society that creates him. (140)

I respect and endorse the opinions of scholars that are more reputable than me in regards to the Brothers Grimm and Swift; but I can certainly speak on my own, when it

comes to writing *27 Doors*. I believe that a true novelist doesn't write to endorse a literary movement or to contribute to a political agenda; true novelists write to create original stories that touch their readers, moving their emotions and, if successful, providing them with something that the author feels to be of importance. A true novel cannot follow any rules on its inspiration; otherwise its content will become standardized and not credible in its authenticity.

A novel is like a confession. The experience of the reader is as unique as the experience of the writer. Every soul will read the same book, but each will interact differently. Even the writer will, in time, connect with his/her own ideas in a different way that they were originally thought. Novels appear to be static, and yet they are the most moving objects humankind ever created, because they move at the speed of our imagination. And hopefully *27 Doors* does just that.

Now, of course a novelist on a personal and cultural level must confront his/her ideas with those that share similar ideas, and it's OK to influence each other if the goal is to advance literature to a next level. Thus authors can discuss formats, grammar, and use of words; but ultimately, the style of a writer is the product of someone working alone, responding to real life events --tangible or intangible- and conveying them into a fictional story that will enrich the life of others. Such enrichment can vary from pure entrainment to more philosophical teachings, but it must connect the author to the reader through the printed word.

Every book must keep a style of its own. A writer must, however, face the fact that his/her style is about to enter into a larger group of literary creations, and because of

this must be respectful of specific standards and unspoken rules. I'd like to believe that there is a sort of a code that governs every writer, and more so when sharing with others similar topics and genres. Following that code makes the difference between an accomplished novel, and just a manuscript with a good idea.

Literature creates those rules so that readers can relate and understand them at the first read. I wanted to build off these pre-set rules to strengthen the impact of my novella; and also, I wanted to create a continuation with what the Grimm Brothers conveyed, and yet that would support a fresh new plot set in our times.

Another important matter that is strong in Swift, and to some extents to the Grimms as well, is the issue of morality. *Gulliver's Travels* was not meant to be an adventure book, nor the children's book that became in the twentieth century. Indeed Swift truly wanted to leave a strong message to his contemporary fellow citizens. And it is confirmed by this very thoughtful passage from Shirley Galloway:

*As we travel with Gulliver through the voyages, Swift brilliantly peels away our pretensions, layer by layer, until he shows us what we are and challenges us, intensely and urgently, to be better. In Gulliver's Travels, Jonathan Swift continues to vex the world so that it might awaken to the fact that humankind needs saving, but it has to save itself.*

I feel comfortable applying this quote to Jerry, but with a different interpretation, as the above citation implies a negative scenario where humans are limited in their nature, hence cannot really improve. I feel that Jerry is not a superhero, and that he has

his limitations like anyone else, but he can improve his status, because humans are the most gifted creatures on Earth.

As far as the Brothers Grimm, the matter of morality was more focused on children, and personal interaction, and their intentions were very different from Swifts. Grimm didn't intend to change their society. Neither do I with *27 Doors*. Although, at the end Jerry finds his own moral motif to complete his journey.

As a writer it is not my priority to preach or to leave a particular moral statement. I am interested mainly in creating an experience to the reader that is entertaining and yet emotional.

I cannot deny an element of denouncement in my story that tries to highlight and contrast the dark side of society, whereas the most intimate and obscure emotions become the modus operandi of my characters, leaving Jerry to face evil for the first time, including his own wrongdoing. But, going back to Swift on this regard, Orwell declares that *Gulliver's Travels* is an attack on humanity, the aim being to "humiliate Man by reminding him that he is weak and ridiculous, and above all that he stinks." I can't assert that *27 Doors* is an attack on humanity, at least not to the extent that Orwell refers to.

However, if Swift takes a shot at humanity for its political and religious views, and makes irony about its limitations, I show the immoral side through a rough and very explicit reality. And, just like in the Brothers Grimm, I am not shy to put Jerry through horrible things; but I also choose to have him experiencing good moments in life, because humanity is indeed based on a balance between good and evil.

Once again Swift's use of satire allows the author to attack humanity, but that

final vice that results from it, is very similar to the evil I depict in my novella.

I usually avoid cliff notes and secondary sources of that kind, but while browsing the internet I found in a blog this quoted paragraph that links well what I just stated with what I would like to be the ending point of this essay: the sense of powerless alienation of the ego.

However, lest one think that Swift's satire is merely the weapon of exaggeration, it is important to note that exaggeration is only one facet of his satiric method. Swift uses mock seriousness and understatement; he parodies and burlesques; he presents a virtue and then turns it into a vice. He takes pot-shots at all sorts of sacred cows. Besides science, Swift debunks the whole sentimental attitude surrounding children. At birth, for instance, Lilliputian children were "wisely" taken from their parents and given to the State to rear.

Gulliver starts to alienate in part IV to never recover his sanity; Jerry instead uses his sanity to overcome the evil that is thrown against him.

Furthermore, considering the children's aspect of the citation, Jerry lives through the same experience. He was incapable of living life due to his physical condition. Just like the kids in Lilliput, Jerry is forced to leave his family and familiar environment, pushed by the evil force that will make him learn, and which will replace his parents.

Jerry is alone just like Gulliver, away from home in a place that challenges his

standard understanding of how the world should be. The young Lilliputians are called by the state to be educated, and family becomes secondary. Jerry, on his end, still feels the bond to his parents, but he cannot reverse his fate.



### Summary of *27 Doors*

The story begins in Baltimore, 1978 with nineteen-year-old Jerry sleeping inside an iron-lung machine that keeps him alive, and where he has been living most of his life. The sleep is brutally interrupted by an evil dwarf, who pulling Jerry's hair wakes him up and teases him. As Jerry tries to scream for help, his voice doesn't come out, and a mysterious energy breaks the machine giving him the strength to walk outside of his room.

Here Jerry finds total darkness, and 27 doors appear in front of him in a semicircle. A light comes from door number "1." This door opens up, while the other doors produce a loud noise pushing Jerry inside the first door. Jerry is terrified by what he sees, but the reader is not given any information as to what lies inside, with the exception of a few hints about a dwarf holding a knife, and the acknowledgement of several murders being committed.

Jerry, covered with blood, and guided by classical music played by magical white gloves, enters the second door. It takes him to Central Park in New York. Here he meets a child and his mother, who after understanding that Jerry is lost and possibly hurt takes him to the police station where her husband –David--is working on chasing down a serial killer. Jerry discloses his name and address in Baltimore, but is afraid to say how he got to New York. The police database reveals that Jerry died in 1978. The year is now 2015. Everyone, including Jerry, is in total shock.

Jerry is sucked into door 3, and catapulted into a poker game in Las Vegas,

where he meets with an Irish soccer player. He takes Jerry to a brothel out of town, run by a certain Mrs. Ginger.

Jerry then is sucked into door number “4”, and now is sitting on a bus station in Providence, R.I. ready to board to Washington DC. On the bus he meets Victor Garcia, a tourist from Spain, who carries a larger backpack. As the bus gets close to Newark Jerry ends up in door number “5”.

Jerry is invited to join a small team of fishermen, whose captain’s girlfriend Jerry recognizes to be the same Mrs. Ginger from Nevada, only much younger. Now Jerry understands that he is not only traveling to different places, but also through time. In this door Jerry meets an eccentric lady, and spends the night with her in her cottage; discovering for the first time what it means to be physically connected to a woman. When they are at sea, Jerry is transported into door “6,” not before learning the horrifying truth about his first lover.

This chapter takes place in Florida, in an elementary school playground where Jerry meets a young female schoolteacher. She greets him as if she knows him well, saying that the school is very happy about Jerry’s work with “the kid.” Jerry has no idea who the woman is, or who the kid is; although the specific kid she is referring to is now regarding him with an evil look from across the playground.

Door number “7” brings Jerry into an old bar, where Lucy Beth -the owner- invites him for a drink, while a young couple just married is celebrating. Once the bar closes, and Lucy Beth wishes good luck to the young couple, giving them a bottle of wine, Jerry tries to tell his story to Lucy Beth, but he is sucked away, and a written sign

in fresh blood tells him, “It’s not done that way. You don’t share your story.”

Jerry, now behind door “8” awakes inside an open coffin listening to his own eulogy, and people mourning him, but cannot talk back. His parents are not there. Finally the coffin disappears around him, and he is back in the school playground in Florida – Door 9 is the opposite of 6—Jerry is holding the hand of the child with the evil look, but the kid is now good, and he takes Jerry to meet the school teacher he encountered in door 6. The teacher now doesn’t know Jerry, and is pleased to meet him for the first time.

Jerry has little time to figure things out, as he finds himself in door “10” where he meets an older man that challenges him to talk about his situation, and the nature of his surreal journey. From this unexpected encounter, Jerry is brought through door “11” to face three different version of his own self at different ages.

At this juncture door “12” brings Jerry to a foreign shore, leaving United States for the first time, and finding a refreshing energy in an exotic beach, where two women bring more light to what is happening.

But it’s not until door “13” that everything takes a very different turn. Jerry wakes up in someone else’s body, and re-lives one of the previous doors from a different perspective. This initiates a whole new experience for Jerry, where series of same characters come back in different fashion, time, and location, and often he is forced in their bodies.

The premises of a horrible homicide becomes more and more prominent, as new elements surface, and the main plot seems to be going back to the killing site. Jerry meets a mysterious tourist from Spain, whose true identity is less random than it appears.

As Jerry gains self-confidence, he also begins to understand and recognize that the different scenes presented in front of him are not random, but very much connected to each other. The serial killer is indeed one of the characters he encounters, and maybe is Jerry himself. Meanwhile, the evil dwarf shows up from time to time claiming his power over Jerry's soul, but as he does, Jerry gets more and more confident that he can face the evil force.

A good divine intervention that remains ambiguous if real or a product of Jerry's imagination also revitalizes such strength.

Just as Jerry seems to be taking control of his destiny, he is arrested and becomes the number one suspect for the series of homicides that have occurred.

In door "20" the final climax begins. Jerry is back inside a body that has already hosted him, but at a different age and location.

Everything becomes a race against time and against the evil force that controls the 27 doors. Jerry must reach door "27" and erase the atrocity experienced in door "1."

He is now more confident with himself and, almost as a private investigator, tries to put together the pieces of the puzzle.

But, regardless of his efforts, the doors still force him to bounce around at their leisure, until Jerry finds a very important relative of his, for the first time introduced in the story.

As the race to find the truth continues, Jerry lands inside door "27" for the final showdown that will stage all the main characters, revealing their identities, in a bloody

confrontation that will make Jerry prevail or succumb.

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Door 1: “1,2,3... Your life goes to me”

Baltimore 1978.

Twenty years of immobility, experiencing life through stories told by others.

Jerry lived inside an iron lung, from the neck down. The pump that kept him alive by dictating his breathing pattern had become a life companion, as much as the yellowish round metal panel filled with rubber, which grew and shrank around his neck. The only allowed movement was a glimpse outside, where a tree, which in the years had overgrown the frame of the window, gave home to birds stopping by to sing a sparkle of hope into his existence.

That particular day, a blue bird rested on one branch for several hours, and Jerry could not stop staring at it. After sunset the bird flew away, leaving him asleep, while the rain slowly began to hit the glass, gracefully moved by a whispery wind, like instruments orchestrated by Mother Nature,

A ray of moonlight found its way to the clock on the ceiling revealing that it was midnight. Meanwhile, two small hands started to touch Jerry’s hair. At first, almost massaging it, just like his mom did. But then the fingers began a painful movement, pulling it aggressively, causing Jerry to suddenly wake up.

The fear of the unknown forced him to keep his eyes shut, terrorized, and pretending to be in the middle of a bad dream. His eyes eventually slowly opened to find,

leaning upside down on his head, a bald dwarf with missing teeth, laughing at him, revealing black disturbing gums, while cursing through the large spaces in his mouth, making fun of Jerry's impossibility to move.

"I will kill you very slowly, and you will not have strength to cry for help," the dwarf said giggling, his lips trembling with resentment. "By dawn your soul will be mine and your body still as a rock, even more so than now," the dwarf threatened.

Slowly, the sinister midget's skin turned into a red fire, and his eyes became completely black, matching the color inside his mouth, creating the shape of a creepy skull. An evil laugh echoed in the air, and Jerry was alone again, in the middle of the room, inside the pumping machine, scared and immobilized.

The blue bird was back staring at him from outside. This time singing a mortal melody, which sounded almost like a sarcastic laugh.

Jerry could sense the blood running inside his veins. At the same time his muscles reinvigorated to the point that his body began breathing on its own; slowing down the pace of the iron pump pushed by his chest. The bird's eyes turned into a pair of woman's eyes whose glance cracked the machine, letting Jerry free to move his body like never before, feeling an overwhelming strength.

The cracks grew bigger, turning the machine into fragments in a matter of seconds, and Jerry's legs started to move instinctively. He stood up in the middle of his bedroom, and for the first time in his life, he walked. There was no hesitation, nor weakness in the moves. He was fully mastering his body, as if it had been always the case.

He tried to call his parents, but his mouth couldn't make any sound. He searched



for his voice down inside his lungs, but only a silent breath came out.

Taking full advantage of his new strength, he walked towards the door, when a chill on his back reminded him that he was about to walk into an entirely unknown world, and suddenly he thought about the dwarf and his words, recalling the fear as his hand reached the door's knob. An intense moment of fright, then he found the courage and the strength to turn the knob.

The door slowly opened, to reveal a pitch-black space. Jerry looked for the light switch, but couldn't find it, meanwhile a familiar metallic rhythmic sound made him turn his head, to discover the machine back on its place, all in one piece, perfectly functioning. In terror Jerry, turned back his head towards the darkness, to find the ugly dwarf right in front of him, with an even more sinister look and evil smile than before.

"You have no choice," he said before disappearing to reappear a second later at a much further distance, "You have no choice, but to follow me into your destiny."

Jerry, confused and scared, walked through the door, which instantaneously closed behind him, to disappear, leaving him in total obscurity. A punch in the stomach and an evil laugh introduced a bright light coming from far away into the darkness, while a violent kick on his genitals left him without air, a sensation very familiar to him.

"Just a reminder of what you really are, and that you will suffer before dying," Jerry heard before falling on the floor unconscious.

When he opened his eyes, a long old worn rug on a floating corridor appeared in front of him, slicing the black environment in half. Two endless walls formed on both sides of the corridor, featuring a pale yellowish wallpaper, with large brownish stains all over, releasing a strong odor of moisture, making the air humid as in a basement locked

for centuries.

As Jerry gained some strength back, he was able to stand up again. One door after another materialized following the corridor. They were all brownish wooden doors, each marked with a number in the middle. Suddenly, the corridor began to change its shape, and Jerry remained still in the middle of it. Door number “2”, and every subsequent door all the way to “27” lined around in a perfect circle following the door marked with a “1”, which stood right across from Jerry.

All surroundings turned black once again, allowing just the first door to be seen through its edges, perfectly colored in red. The contrast of black and red, although somehow elegant, was not inviting at all.

A light from underneath the door became visible, and the number “1” lit up, recalling the same red of the edges, when Jerry was strongly pushed by an external force against it. So strong, as to actually convince him that it had broken his jaw, so violent was the crash. Jerry was literally smashed against the door, with his arm twisted behind his back, held by powerful invisible hands. He felt a breath behind his neck, going all over his ear, when an evil voice shouted breaking the silence.

“1,2,3, your life goes to me,” then silence again.

The light went off from beneath the door, while a loud knocking started simultaneously from inside the other twenty-six doors.

Jerry, now free to move, reached for the knob, which slowly turned by itself at the first touch, as if someone were opening it from the inside. And when the door was fully open, Jerry wished he had never touched it.

## Door 2: A walk in the park

Blood was still on his hands, and his heart was shaking for it was beating so fast. Jerry's eyes could not erase the horrifying images that scattered in pieces were coming back to his mind like a puzzle rapidly forming into wholeness. The dwarf, the knife, the murders, and the blood made a scar in the middle of his soul, deeper than all those years spent immobilized in a machine.

A loud scream froze Jerry, almost as if everything was about to start again. Door number "1" closed behind him disappearing, and hell was no longer around him.

Silence and darkness didn't help Jerry to recover from the dramatic experience he had just lived. He held his legs, sitting in an egg position, touching his entire body at once, conscious of being able to control all his muscles, yet convinced that never before he had to face so much pain and sorrow. The machine had helped him to live, rather than stealing a life from him, but now his own body proved to be an evil machine, uncontrollable, and perhaps well deserving to be locked up for life.

Regardless of the events just occurred, deep inside Jerry knew himself to be a good person, a man of values, whose soul was impeccable. However ultimately was the brain controlling the body, so how in hell could all of that have been possible?

That's right, 'in Hell', he thought.

Jerry was lost in his memories, pushing his face in between his knees, when silk white gloves, floating in the air started playing classical music on two violins and a

piano, letting the darkness of the circle fade in favor of a pleasant and warm glow that guided him in front of door number “2,” which from the nothing had come to light.

There was no knob, and it was blue in color with yellow edges, but for the rest it looked exactly like door number “1,” and like the remaining other 25.

The music kept on playing smoothly until a female voice slowly started to sing, embracing Jerry as if he were a musical note. He couldn’t resist it, his body was moving without control towards the door, which opened by itself. The flow carried him inside, then the door shut, and the music was gone.

A park lay in front of his eyes. A very big park with a lake in the middle and trees everywhere. Flowers were blooming, and birds sang as Jerry walked. Swans, like ice skaters, skimmed the water, moving around flawlessly. Meanwhile a few ducks tried to swim over the same path, to quickly change directions, leaving the exclusivity to the swans that elegantly kept their movement, in a status of unspoken royalty.

Jerry bit his lips, holding back the tears from coming down. A light breeze blew the hair on his arms and the flowers nearby, leaving an enchanted scent. He had heard of such things from tales and books, but his senses had never experienced any of that.

As Jerry kept on walking, he realized that he wasn’t alone, not in a spiritual ghostly sense this time. The park was indeed filled with actual people, focused on their activities, and mostly wearing city or sport clothes.

A child running after a kite bumped into him. For a moment Jerry thought about the dwarf, but his fear soon transformed into a smile, seeing the child confused about the direction of the kite, and concerned that he had lost it forever. By instinct Jerry had taken the wire IN his hand, and gave it back to the child who happily kept on running, without

even thanking him. Jerry followed with his eyes the flying kite, up in the sky, almost reaching the clouds.

“Thank you. Sorry for my son, but that kite is his life, and when he flies it, he loses track of everything,” a blond blue-eyed woman spoke.

Jerry had never really interacted with a woman in a social manner before. He stayed still, staring at her, not really sure whether his voice was back, or still taken away from him.

“I am sorry, my name is Jane, do you understand me? Do you speak English?” The woman asked politely, with a reassuring smile.

Jerry opened his mouth, and as if nothing had happened, his voice came out fluid and strong.

“Yes, I speak English. I am from Baltimore, and my name is Jerry,” he replied.

“Baltimore? Nice, are you visiting?” She kept asking.

“Visiting?” Jerry acted surprised.

“Yes, are you in New York visiting?” She continued in a very friendly tone, keeping an eye on her son, who not too far away was enjoying his kite.

“New York? You mean thee New York City?” He asked in shock.

“Let me guess? Hangover? An all-night from back home, and left behind by your friends?” Jane added still looking over her son.

“New York City? Oh my God!” he said worriedly.

“Don’t worry! There is nothing to be ashamed of. The same thing happened to me when I graduated from college. My friends drove me from Boston, and left this true Red Sox fan in SoHo in the arms of the most arrogant New Yorker. Results of that night: little

Jimmy over there, and me moving to Yankee-land,” she said smiling.

“Actually, I am not really sure how I got here, and I have definitely not been drinking. Where are we exactly?” Jerry spoke in confusion.

For the first time since their encounter Jane became worried.

“Are you OK? Do you need some help? You seem pale.”

After a closer look she couldn’t miss Jerry’s old-fashioned training outfit.

“You like the vintage 70’s style, ah? And what’s up with the Houston Oilers? That is a name I haven’t heard in a long while.

Jerry was indeed wearing pajamas, with torn pants, as a result of what happened inside room number “1.”

While she kept on talking, she noticed blood on Jerry’s hands. Looking closer, she saw two fresh wounds on his neck, and that he was not wearing any shoes, just plain white socks, or at least what once were white socks, since the color was now leaning towards some sort of brownish tint. Jerry seemed to be harmless and, although the blood was not a pleasant sight, Jane’s maternal instinct told her that he needed help, and that somehow he was not the hunter, but the victim.

“What happened to you? Is that your blood, what is going on?”

Jerry looked at her and, in a very casual way, almost fading out all his confusion, answered, “I must’ve fallen.”

The same maternal instinct warned Jane that it was a lie.

“C’mon. I deal with a seven year old every day, and you can’t fool me. Stay put, I am calling for some help.”

She took her iPhone out of her purse, and started operating the touch-screen. That

little unknown device fascinated Jerry and, for a moment, he forgot all that was happening.

“Wow! That is a pretty cool walkie-talkie,” he acted very surprised.

“I know a bunch of fanatic teenagers down at the Apple store that will kill you for saying that,” she said smiling.

Jerry couldn't make the connection between a walkie-talkie and a fruit store, but for the time being, he felt that it was better to leave it there. Jane in the meantime had reached her party on the phone.

“Hi David. It's me. Listen, I need some help. I am in Central Park, with a man that clearly needs some assistance. Could you send someone?”

In a matter of a few minutes two policemen showed up riding those electric two wheelers that people ride standing up. Jerry of course had never seen those, but as before, he preferred not to make his situation more complicated. The officers asked what had happened to Jerry, but he very politely simply said that he couldn't remember. After all, they would have never bought the story of the 27 doors, and even if they did, door number “1” would have raised too many questions, and caused him a lot of trouble. Besides, he didn't really care to go back over such memory. Without proper identification, Jerry was taken to the police station, and Jane went along.

Once at the station, David was anxiously waiting for them, and asked Jerry to wait outside his office for a minute, while Jane was asked to enter.

“When will you grow some sort of sense? What were you thinking, engaging in a conversation with a stranger, and even in front our son?” David attacked Jane.

“We were in the middle of Central Park, surrounded by hundreds of people, and I

engaged him because he happened to have just saved Jimmy's kite. I realized that he was in some kind of trouble only after talking to him."

"All right, I am sorry, it has been a long day. The serial killer is driving us nuts, and I am not really happy about having a nutcase talking to my wife, with hands filled with blood."

"I read the paper this morning," she said. It's the fifth killing in less than three months."

"Well that's not all. I am not supposed to talk about it, but we are getting the feeling that this bastard is linked also to the homicides in Washington D.C. last year. It's like he is moving following a geographic pattern. It's a very unusual case," David concluded, while Jane walked behind him, and kissed his cheek.

"All right, I leave Jerry to you guys, and I will see you at home."

Jane walked out of her husband's office, and wished good-bye to Jerry, who was invited to step in. David stared at him for a long second. The blood was gone, and he was wearing now some sort of plastic flip-flops, lost on his thoughts, and clearly very confused.

"So, you told us your name and address, but you don't remember how you got here from Baltimore, nor how you injured yourself. I'd like to help you buddy, but you don't really give me any room over here."

A young officer stepped into the office, and handed a file to David. David opened it, and his face turned pale. He looked at the file, and then stared at Jerry, then at the young officer. Silence fell in the room. One of those silences, which are so silent that almost make a very loud noise straight to the heart.



“According to this, you have been dead 29 years,” David said in shock to Jerry.

### Door 3: Nevada Express

One minute or one year, it didn’t really matter at that point how long he was out cold. When slowly Jerry opened his eyes, he was in the circle; once again facing the twenty-seven doors. Number “3” glowed in the dark. The other doors, like a tribal ritual, were making loud noises, pushing Jerry to go towards the next door; and so he did.

The door mysteriously faded in front of his eyes. Jerry couldn’t really see anything. Although, as he walked in he started to smell cigar smoke, and different human voices began to talk. The room was dark, with a round table in the middle. Four men sat down, and a half dozen more wandered around the room. One single light was right above the table, with a pile of chips in the center. An obese man, sitting down and holding five cards, was about to talk; and at that moment everyone shut up. As his lips were about to open, the big man turned his eyes to acknowledge Jerry’s presence. He stared at him for a few seconds, and then his full concentration returned to his cards.

“I see your \$100,000,” he said quietly.

The other two men folded: a bold Asian guy, and a young kid who was probably just past twenty-one. Now, it was between the obese man and a red haired man, in his early 30’s, with freckles on his face and an Irish attitude that could have been spotted from miles.

“Very well,” the Irishman said.

He laid down his cards on the table: a mere pair of Kings. The obese man, looked at his opponent, and with total control without showing the smallest emotion replied, “This is a night that you will remember for the rest of your life.”

A pair of Aces fell on the table. The man asked one of his assistants to collect his winnings. He left the table without saying another word, and without showing the other three cards that he placed in his pocket, while slowly walking away.

In a matter of minutes everyone was gone, with the exception of the Irish guy and Jerry. The man was still sitting down, sipping from a glass of whiskey.

“Would you care to join me tonight for a night of drinking and hookers? You don’t lose two and half million dollars every night. This calls for a celebration, and I might as well throw away the last few thousands that I have left. By the way my name is Mark.” He said, offering Jerry his right hand. “Well who cares? It’s just money and I will make it back soon enough. See, I am a football player and I broke my knee, but they still need to pay four million pounds every year for the next five years. So let’s go, we need to drive out of town, as the real fun is illegal within the city limits. Americans and their stupid rules. Go figure them.”

Jerry followed Mark in what started to feel more of a dream than reality, although the emotions were real. He couldn’t control the environment, and decided to follow the flow as he was certain that a superior power was controlling whatever was happening to him, and that everything was following a certain direction. Of course, if he only thought for a second about what happened inside door number “1,” he would have immediately thought otherwise. But his memory, for the time being, had removed certain aspects of

door number “1.”

“What’s your name?” Mark asked while walking towards the elevator. “And what’s going on with the Oilers’ outfit and the flip flops?”

“I am Jerry,” Jerry responded politely.

“Well Jerry, do not worry too much about your looks, the ladies we are about to meet are not exactly interested in our clothes; if you know what I mean?”

Jerry knew exactly what Mark meant, and a sense of terror went through his back. He had heard so much about physical contact with a woman; he had watched movies, even the hardcore ones that his cousin Jeff would sneak in into his room from time to time. But, the truth was that Jerry had never been with a woman, nor even touched one for the matter. But his male instinct and the demands of the senses were way stronger than anything else. He was about to experience the real thing, and there were neither philosophical interpretations nor the 27 doors that could distract him from such event.

The sunset put on a show that Jerry really wanted to enjoy. Once again, as if for the first time, his eyes were exposed to nature’s beauty. The reddish light was hitting the hills of rock that surround Las Vegas, and the desert offered evening shadows, which accompanied the two men in their journey searching for pleasure.

Mark was driving the rental car, as he knew exactly where he was going. He knew the directions out of town, and thereafter, as someone that had been there several times. Almost like a commuting driver that wasn’t going to work, but to an alternative life, he wanted to forget everything and everybody, in the arms of a woman, or probably more than one, wearing cheap perfume and easily benevolent on his regards, no questions

asked and no hassles in the morning.

Jerry was still enjoying the last strikes of nature, when the stars started to fade in, and the sky turned black, somehow a very different black from room “1.”

“It was the final, you know? Against Arsenal. At Wembley you know? Thousands of screaming fans, and I had scored the first two goals, it was my game you know? I was all by myself close to the box, when I felt it. I turned on myself, and I felt the crack. my leg melted below my body, and I fell like a baby, in the middle of my game. The doctors said that I have to wait one year to touch a football again, but I know it, my friend, my career is over. I will never come back,” Mark broke into Jerry’s thoughts, while tears were coming down on his cheeks, like a little baby. “Money and fame come and go, you see? And women are all whores, except for mothers; but the emotion of scoring a goal, of putting your team ahead, of knowing that you are giving a dream to millions of people, that’s priceless, there is nothing like it.”

Mark spoke crying, almost to himself, ejecting words from his heart, while driving into a tunnel of trance and confusion, thousands of miles away from Wembley, from his team, from his life.

Jerry’s thoughts went to a boy spending all his life inside a machine, smelling fresh air for the first time, riding in a car, but that would have probably been too much to handle for Mark.

After a full 40 minutes drive, Mark pulled inside a driveway of what seemed to be some sort of ranch. A few cars were parked outside, and some girls were talking on the front porch, smoking cigarettes, and sharing a bottle of wine.

“My friend, tonight is on me. Do not worry about money, do what it pleases you,

and I will see you in the morning,” Mark told Jerry, while stepping out of the car.

They walked inside the estate, and in a matter of seconds Mrs. Ginger welcomed them. She hugged Mark, and introduced herself to Jerry. Mark had already spotted a nice green-eyed brunette who was sitting on the other side of the room. It didn’t take very long for her to walk towards him with a flirting look, which stole Mark’s complete attention, and let him disappear in another room with her, leaving Jerry behind with Mrs. Ginger.

Mrs. Ginger was a little overweight, dyed blonde, very well dressed, with light makeup, and a line of real pearls around her neck.

“So, I take that this is your the first time in a place like this? Can I introduce you to our lounge?”

Mrs. Ginger had no idea on how much of a first time it was, Jerry thought; and although very much taken by what was going to happen, he couldn’t stop thinking about Mrs. Ginger herself. Her face spoke of a past that was somehow different than running a brothel. For sure she was not a princess, but her life seemed to have been stopped at a given time, and her present attitude appeared to be disconnected from her past.

Jerry genuinely liked her, and his deep thoughts were the consequence of many years being immobilized, when the only thing that kept him alive was his brain’s endless imagination.

Mrs. Ginger walked Jerry to the lounge bar, and wished him a pleasant stay, after reassuring him that Mark was taking care of any expense that he would incur.

The lounge was very classy. The red velvet and western country club style mismatched Jerry’s Houston Oilers' outfit, but his “walking” life was still too young to

pick on that, and to have developed any level of sophistication. Thank God at least for the sneakers, which Mark had lent to him back in Vegas.

Jerry sat down at the bar, and a friendly bartender asked him what he wanted to drink. Jerry asked for a coke, and promptly he was served, while a blond girl, in her early twenties, sat next to him, and started flirting.

“I am Jessica, and what is your name?”

“Jerry,” he answered.

“Wow. We already have a J in common. That’s a great start already.”

Jerry wouldn’t know a good start from a bad one, and didn’t bother to look or talk to any other girl. He went with Jessica, to a private bedroom.

Jessica started to undress, letting Jerry’s imagination run fast. He thought that the naked skin of a woman was by far the most beautiful thing nature could have produced.

Jessica untied her bra, revealing a breast that was calling for love and affection; an affection that she never had. She slowly turned, and lowered her panties. A frontal view of her from a reflection in the mirror introduced Jerry to the female organ. Jessica closed her eyes, and slowly danced, knowing she was being watched. A sensation that she wanted to prolong as much as possible, making love to that energy, hugged by an innocent glance, before sex would ruin everything.

Jerry was still staring at the mirror when, with horror, he noticed that the bedroom’s door, also in the reflection, supplied a background to Jessica’s naked body, and started glowing an unequivocal number “4.”

#### Door 4: The Andalusian Man

The door grew bigger in the mirror, coming out of it, and sucking Jerry in. This time bypassing the circle of the 27 doors.

Jerry was thrown into a bus station in Providence, Rhode Island. A sign said “bus to Washington DC,” and a short line of ten or twelve people was waiting to board. Jerry started to gather his thoughts in a more active way; after all an obscure force had passively bumped him from place to place.

What if he actually tried to go back to Baltimore? Maybe, he could get there before being thrown elsewhere, or maybe he could learn to control the situation. Baltimore was on the way to Washington, so he thought that it was worth the effort. Now, the problem was to find the money for the ticket, and for a man of a different time, wearing an outfit of an NFL team apparently long gone, was not an easy task. He looked around to find some inspiration, when he saw a man right behind him, who apparently was in the mood for some small talk.

“Hello, my name is Victor Garcia, and I am from Andalusia, Spain,” the man spoke with a strong Spanish accent.

He wasn’t very tall, and had dark hair. He wore a tee shirt and some shorts with pockets all over. He carried a big backpack, also with many pockets. Hanging from his belt, he had a midsize Swiss pocketknife.

“Nice to meet you,” Jerry answered, trying to pretend that it was just a regular day for him, and that he was in complete control of his actions. “My name is Jerry, and I am trying to go home, to Baltimore.”

“How far is Baltimore from Washington?” Victor asked.

“No more than one hour.”

“Do you live there?” Victor asked.

“Oh yes! I lived there all my life.”

“Well, I’ve never been to Baltimore. If you let me spend a couple of days at your place, I will pay for your bus ticket. Do we have a deal?”

“I’d love to say yes, but I live with my parents, and maybe it’s not such a good idea,” Jerry concluded.

Jerry was concerned that his house might not be his anymore, and his parents might have moved. Anything could have happened. Then again, Victor was the only option he had to get on that bus that was leaving in 10 minutes.

“Buenos,” Victor said, “ I will buy you the ticket and if your parents do not want me to e-sleep at your home, then you pay my money back, and I will find a hostel.”

Jerry thought that it was an agreeable plan, and let Victor purchase his ticket. The two boarded, and sat together and the bus left for Washington DC.

How long was he going to stay on the bus? Was he going to be able to see Baltimore? These questions were hammering at Jerry so that he barely listened to the excitement of Victor, who couldn’t keep his mouth shut, taking pictures with his digital camera and writing small notes on a diary.

“I like to remember everything, and in my bag I keep a e-small memory of every place I visit.”

The bus driver cut him off as he announced a twenty-minute stop for refreshments at a gas station plaza with a McDonald’s and hundreds of cars parked. Victor put his bag



on his back, and stepped down from the bus, while Jerry preferred to remain onboard.

Twenty minutes went by, and all the passengers returned to the bus, but not Victor. Jerry mentioned the fact to the driver who, very upset, allowed two more minutes. After that, Victor was still missing. The driver couldn't wait any longer, and closed the door. Jerry asked to go down in search for Victor.

"Ok, but if you are not back in five, I leave you too here," the driver said without compassion.

Jerry looked everywhere, but there was no trace of Victor. With his consciousness freed, Jerry returned to the bus, which left the plaza and the Andalusian tourist behind.

After many hours, and hundreds of miles, Baltimore was in sight. As the Greyhound bus entered the city, Jerry looked outside, wondering if he could find his way home. His eyes were wet, when suddenly right in the middle of the window a small number "5" began to get larger, while a door shaped around it.

Jerry really wanted to stay. He turned around, but avoiding to look at the window didn't do the trick. In a few seconds, he was in the circle, with the 27 doors silently standing in front of him.

Everything looked the same, but this time some clothes were hanging by one door. To be precise: a yellow raincoat, a pair of Rubbermaid boots, and some working outfit.

As soon as Jerry touched the clothes, they materialized on him, replacing the Houston Oilers' p.j. that was now hanging by door number "5," with the sneakers underneath it.

The door slowly opened, and Jerry could have never imagined what was inside.

## Door 5: Waves of a lifetime

The door was wide open and Jerry could see a shoreline of rocks and hills, culminating with a lighthouse that contrasted the moonlight. The sound of the waves against the rocks supplied a loud melody accompanying Jerry's walking in. As soon as he moved in wearing the big Rubbermaid boots, the circle and the door faded in favor of a pier, a wooden pier at sea level, going into the water.

Light poles were perfectly distanced on the left and right side, creating an interesting chiaroscuro, which the ocean made mystic to Jerry's eyes. If the perfect balance between life and nature could be painted, probably that was the picture that Jerry would have chosen, but Jerry was not an artist.

Walking the pier, he encountered a few people, mostly young lovers and old fishermen trying to catch something, more for a lifelong need of fishing than for actual commercial purposes. As Jerry continued his way, he noticed a little group of men gathered on the side. They spoke with passion and with a certain concern that made Jerry very curious, and that same curiosity drew the men toward him.

"Hey young man? Do you wanna work? We are short of a man and tomorrow we must take our boat out for fishing. Our pal broke his arm and will be out for a while. I pay well, and you won't have to change your clothes." One of them asked. The man wore a marine blue coat and a captain's hat, with a perfectly groomed black beard.

Jerry didn't really know much about fishing but, without hesitation, answered, "Absolutely, I surely need the money; and at the moment I'm on foot."

"Very well then, you are hired. Come here and I will introduce you to the rest of

the boys.”

Everything happened quickly; they agreed on the salary for a full night of work and the appointment was set for 5 pm sharp at the port. A sense of achievement embraced Jerry, since getting paid for something he had to do felt very special. He could not stop the excitement; however, he had twenty-four hours to kill before embarking, no money in his pocket, and no place to rest or to eat.

He didn't bother thinking about the doors; his only concern was to fully enjoy the moment. Taken up by his thoughts, he was approached by a woman in her mid-thirties walking alone by the pier. There was an empty smile on her face, but her eyes called for Jerry's attention. No words were spoken; only a delicate walk that stopped next to him, as she gently took his right hand. She stared at Jerry for a while, freezing him in a powerless state.

“This hand has done horrible things,” she said looking at him straight in the eyes, “but this heart has space for redemption.” She continued bringing his hand against his heart.

“Who are you?” Jerry asked.

Silence fell again for a few moments between the two, then she casually said, “I am your destiny,” dancing a few steps away from him.

A wave, stronger than the others, hit the shore and a few drops of water reached Jerry. The woman was staring at him from a distance now, holding a scarf above her head, breathing the mild wind, and, barefoot, continuing her dance in small circular steps, slowly coming closer to Jerry.

“Would you care to join me for a cup of tea? My house is right there,” she asked,

pointing at a little cottage near the lighthouse.

Her skin was very white, showing her veins and a smile now full of excitement. Jerry looked at her and, without thinking twice, took her hands, and waltzed all the way to the cottage.

The furniture inside was antique, and so were the curtains, the rugs, and everything else. All was perfectly clean and in place. Jerry wasn't sure where and especially when he was, and to avoid any embarrassing questions, and after having experienced four doors already, he simply decided to accept things as they were. She went to the kitchen to brew some tea, and offered the comfort of her house to Jerry, who had spotted a bottle of cognac dated 1827. It was open, and probably had been drunk not too long before.

"Please be my guest, pour yourself a glass, it's a great cognac." The lady said. Jerry took a sip, but the taste was not what he expected; after all, he was still learning about life, and that was the first time he had ever tasted alcohol.

As he walked back towards the table where the lady was serving the tea, Jerry noticed a newspaper, "The Sentinel of Sea", and the headline stated, "Tragedy at Sea: 5 die!" Jerry picked UP the paper and read the date, "May 5th, 1829." The lady took the paper from his hands, and with a sad glance put it back where it was.

"It's amazing, they were here just a few days ago, standing where you are right now. You never know what tomorrow brings."

The lady walked back towards Jerry, and without a glimpse or a smile kissed him on the mouth, her lips softly touching his, and warmth came from her breast touching his

chest. He felt a sense of belonging that only the iron-lung-machine had given to him. In that moment, he learned that the body was actually capable of amazing things, and worked in perfect synchronization with the spirit. Of course, the kiss was merely the first step into Jerry's learning. Soon enough he would discover that the body was indeed capable of many more amazing things, and for the first time he became physically part of another human being.

In the morning he woke up feeling very light. The bed was empty, with no traces of his host, his first lover. The house was still in perfect order, but seemed old in comparison with the night before. Several hours passed and, without a particular reason, Jerry remained in the house. That was the longest time he had been behind a door, and he also realized that for the first time since his crazy journey started, he had actually slept.

Wearing his working clothes, he left the house. He felt sad for not being able to say goodbye to the lady, but at the same time happy to have initiated a new part of his life. He was taking with him the manhood he dreamed for so long; as well as taking three apples from the kitchen just in case, because he couldn't know when he would have been able to eat again.

He followed the path down from the cottage that he had danced through the night before, all the way to the pier, looking back from time to time to see if he could spot his lady, but nothing, there was no trace of her.

Once back at the Pier, he saw Billy, one of the boys from the crew that he had met the day before.

"Are you ready for tonight big boy?" Billy asked.

“Yes, I am all set,” Jerry replied.

The two walked together to the local bar, where the owner was the Captain’s girlfriend. A certain Ms. Mary Ann Sullivan.

Things were much more modern than what he saw in the cottage, or on the pier, whose settings the night made timeless. Inside the bar, a big square TV broadcast a football game, and the Houston Oilers were playing. Jerry looked around trying to figure out the actual year, while a guy that sounded a lot like Bruce Springsteen was singing about being born in the U.S.A. out of a blue-lit jukebox-like machine.

Of course, his thoughts went to the paper that he saw at the cottage, colliding with the furniture and style of the bar.

“Well the Captain tells me that he has great expectations about you,” Ms. Sullivan told Jerry with a classy and welcoming glance. Ms. Sullivan used to treat the crew the day of sailing, it was almost a tradition. “We’ll take good care of you then. After all, if I can accept that we re-elected an actor for President, I can certainly spare an extra sandwich.”

Jerry couldn’t make much sense of her words, but that didn’t really matter because he couldn’t stop staring at Ms. Sullivan’s eyes and her overall look; he knew her from somewhere. She looked so familiar, but simply couldn’t remember from where. Mary Ann however didn’t show any sign of knowing Jerry from before, and the afternoon proceeded with the arrival of the others, a few laughs and some instructions for the upcoming fishing trip.

When it was time to leave, the Captain and Mary Ann kissed and hugged with a sense of companionship. In that instant Jerry could see true love between the two. For a

moment, he remembered the night before, and then his mom came in his thoughts, and he missed her a great deal.

The boat was docked in one of the first slots, and the Captain celebrated a small introductory ritual.

“Dear Jerry, meet Mrs. Ginger.” The captain spoke out loud, revealing the name of the boat and a nice handmade drawing of a female face resembling Ginger Rogers, right next to it. At that moment Jerry was struck by the name Ginger, and realized that 20 years younger and 40 pounds lighter, Ms. Sullivan looked exactly like the Mrs. Ginger from Nevada. He had no doubts; it was her. Not a sister, not a look-alike; her glance was unique, and he couldn’t be wrong, they were the same person.

The boat sailed at sunset. From outside the port, they could see the lighthouse and the cottage, which, to Jerry’s surprise, appeared abandoned to the point that the path was closed by wildly grown vegetation. Jerry asked Bill what had happened to the cottage.

“The cursed cottage?” Billy laughed. “Nobody has lived there since the tragedy of 1829,” he answered.

“You mean the five men that drowned?” Jerry asked.

“Well, yes that too. But mainly it became a full tragedy when the lady that lived there committed suicide. She was married to one of the five and mother of the other four. She couldn’t bear the pain and jumped off the cliff a few days after the accident.

“There is a legend in town that she appears every night by the lighthouse in search of fishermen. She spends the night with them before they go to sea, and then haunts their boat, hoping that the sea will take them and release her family back to her.

“The Captain actually believes in this story, and we are not really supposed to talk about it. Not even as a joke, and especially on the boat. In my opinion it is all superstition,” Billy concluded, while adjusting the nets.

Jerry stopped breathing for a few seconds, but at that point he preferred to be silent. He turned to enter the cabin when he noticed a number 6 on door. He looked one more time at the cottage and saw the lady waving at him; then full darkness embraced him.

#### Door 6: The Kid and the Woman

Heart and reason do not always go in the same direction, and one thing that is always guaranteed is that people are somehow the owners of their souls and consequently masters of their actions, regardless of the age and social conditions.

The darkness soon gave way to a cloudless sunny day. The heat was strong and Jerry found himself walking down a very long path right by the sea, while the city was following the pattern of the shore. He had no idea in which city he was and mostly, once again no idea of the year. His Oilers’ outfit was all cleaned and ironed and miraculously returned to his body, replacing the fisherman clothes. His sneakers were also back.

He must have walked at least two miles, before deciding to cut inside the city and leave the harbor behind. Trees and single unit homes were on the left and right of the street with very few people walking by.



It was very hard to gather any clue as to the time frame or the whereabouts of his locations, until the latter was revealed by a very big sign on the front of a building: Tampa Elementary School.

Jerry's mom had bought him a map of the U.S. when he was young, and he had spent hours and hours studying it, memorizing the name of the cities and then his dad would take the time to read off a geography book about the same very cities. Jerry loved that; it was a great way to learn, but also a powerful alternative to a flat small room of an apartment in Baltimore.

He could travel to places, carried to his thoughts by his dad's voice, and often he felt like he was actually there. Tampa, Florida in all honesty had never really been on the top of his list in terms of places to visit, but although he had no idea why he was there, he enjoyed the bay walk and the overall environment.

The school was a building of three stories made of yellow bricks. On the front there was a sand-playground, which Jerry entered undisturbed to sit on one of the swings.

Jerry had never been in school before, but he never really missed it, and even the swing with its moves and curious features didn't seem to excite him more than the usual feeling of experiencing something different. Walking on sand, however, had somehow provoked a curious reaction. The texture of the sand, its mobility, its capability of taking different shapes, and then flying away with the wind were all unique characteristics.

But what really fascinated Jerry was the fact that sand would form small dunes under his feet, where the sunlight hit one side, leaving the other in total darkness, as if only half truth should be revealed, and the other to be discovered slowly, with no rush at the mercy of a higher power. The same power that controls the sun that turning will

eventually bring light to the dark side in the ultimate revealing.

All these deep thoughts went away in a split second, when hundreds of kids arrived running on the sand, reshaping the dunes, and virtually recreating thousands of new dark and bright sides.

“I am glad that you could make it,” a lovely female voice talked to him.

Jerry in total surprise turned his attention to a beautiful brunette teacher who was walking towards him and sat on the swing right next to him.

“Wow! You must have been a major Oiler fan. You are wearing the same outfit from the other day,” she said leaving Jerry in a deeper surprise. “Anyhow, Jerry, let’s talk about the kid, because there is a lot to cover and recess lasts only 30 minutes,” she continued as if they knew each other very well.

“Sure, absolutely, whatever you feel is best.” Jerry answered, dodging his confusion.

“I am not going to repeat myself, now, but the institute is really happy for what you are doing. The kid is very happy to spend time with you, and of course whatever will come out of this, we’ll take it. President Bush seems to be in favor of this sort of program.”

At the word “Bush,” an image from the police station in New York hit Jerry’s mind; precisely a copy of the New York Times on David’s office. The headline was all for the serial killer and the efforts to capture him, but there was also an article talking about a certain President George Bush.

“President George Bush?” Jerry asked promptly returning from his thoughts.

“The one and only,” the teacher replied smiling. “I take that you voted for the

other guy,” she kept on joking.

That was the proof that he must have been at least in the same presidential term that he was in New York, but then again that could have been a gap of time of 4 years, even 8 years if this George Bush had been reelected and serving his second mandate. Of course, Jerry could have easily looked up a license plate to check the expiration, but he wasn't familiar with registrations nor with the Florida laws, therefore such a solution never occurred to him. The mystery however was soon revealed, as another teacher walked towards them holding a local newspaper, the Tampa Tribune, clearly mentioning that there were ninety days to the 1992 Summer Olympics opening day in Barcelona.

So, it was 1992 – again another year, but this time he clearly had been there before. But how? Door number “1” maybe? There were moments that went forgotten from what happened in there, and Jerry didn't have any desire to remember them. But some chill of reminiscence came alive, when a kid stared at him with an evil look from across the playground.

#### Door 7: Lucy Beth

Suddenly and without any transition, Jerry was sitting in an old bar, a few clients here and there, and a female singer with a guitar and an exquisite voice was entertaining them. A big golden 7 was on stage behind the singer, and actually all over the bar.

“Welcome to the ‘Lucky 7 Lounge,’ I didn't see you coming in. I hope you didn't have to wait very long. My name is Lucy Beth, can I bring you something to drink?” she

asked with a very strong Texan accent.

“I am sorry, I am lost. I’m from out of town and not exactly carrying any cash with me, I will leave at once.”

“No worries, my dad was a great fan of the Oilers, and you don’t see much of them around anymore, they were a great team, so many memories. I tell you what, enjoy the show and don’t worry about a thing, we are not very busy tonight, so I don’t need the table,” Lucy Beth told Jerry in a lovely and hospitable manner that Jerry truly appreciated.

The night went by, a few more songs and people getting drunk on their own, with the exception of a young couple that, slow dancing in a corner, couldn’t stay away from each other.

Jerry stared at them, thinking about his parents.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” Lucy Beth said, sitting next to Jerry, “They got married today. From out of town just like you, and with an old Cadillac parked out front. It’s like in the movies.”

When everybody else had left, even the singer, the young lovers were still dancing, without music, suspended in their young love.

Lucy Beth gave them an extra ten minutes after closing, and then gave them a cheap local bottle of wine to go and walked them to the door.

“You drink that in the motel across the street now, you hear? I don’t want you two to get arrested or killed on your wedding night.”

The two thanked her, leaving happily.

“Probably they are going to sleep in the car, under some tree. Maybe I should

have invited them in, and spared a fresh bed, after all it's their first night. Oh well, they are young and I am sure that it wouldn't matter to them to spend it in the back seat of the car." Lucy went on speaking to Jerry, while locking the door, "And what about you? Are you going to kill me or rape me now? Maybe that's all I need to snap out of this shithole. But that's all my old man left me, so I gotta keep it running."

"Please don't worry about me, I am actually on my way out, I have taken already enough of your time."

"Don't be silly, you can't go anywhere at this time. You don't have a car, no money, trust me this is no place to walk at night. Besides, I like your face and I'd like some company while I clean up the bar," Lucy Beth said, inviting Jerry to stay.

"Thank you very much, I'll take up your invite, but only if you let me help." Jerry answered.

"Fine by me, get that plastic tray over there and start collecting all the dirty glasses."

It didn't take very long to put everything back in order and ready for the following business day. Lucy sat down to smoke a cigarette and sip a glass of whiskey. While Jerry kept wandering around the bar, finding posters and signed pictures on the wall.

"They are all the people that performed here, over the years. Some were really famous, you know? Well, at least locally. Things started to slow down when my dad died, but that's all another story."

The bar had given no clues to Jerry's whereabouts, but he was starting to get

acquainted with that.

“So why Lucky Seven?” He asked.

“I was the seventh kid, and my dad named the bar after me. He always said that I was a lucky one, but considering that all my brothers are very successful and filthy rich, I guess that my dad was wrong,” she said, slowly sipping her drink.

Jerry felt a strong desire to share his story with her, but didn’t exactly know how to go on. So he pretended to have read a science-fiction story, and with that excuse he was able to narrate his reality. Lucy listened very carefully, laughing, as if she was hearing a comedy. She even laughed at the evil dwarf.

“I’ll tell you what, it sounds like a fun story. It reminds me of Tom Sawyer in the cave, escaping from the Indian. Was there an Indian in that room number 1 with all the blood coming out? Oh! Sorry, the story doesn’t tell us what was in there.”

Jerry asked for the bathroom, understanding that there was no chance to find help for his personal journey. Lucy pointed the men’s room and he excused himself.

It was an old restroom, with small square white tiles on the floor and halfway up the wall. A set of three sinks, and a big mirror reflected Jerry’s terrified face with several words written on it, “It’s not done that way. You don’t share your story.”

The words were written in fresh blood, dripping down on the counter to form a very disturbing number 8.

Door 8: “Mom, dad! I am here”

As with the previous door, there was no transition whatsoever, only a smooth and rapid change in the scenario.

Jerry was now all dressed up in a dark suit and with a tie, supine with his head on a very comfortable silk cushion. He couldn't hear anything, except for a static noise in his ears. He tried to move, but couldn't feel a muscle, not even his eyes, which however were perfectly functioning in terms of vision, but couldn't move. It was like being back in the iron lung machine, but worse.

Slowly that tedious sound turned into understandable words. A man was talking, probably to some sort of an audience. Jerry could hear people crying, and some coughing softly.

“What happened to Jerry is sad, but we should all take a moment to reflect more on why it happened rather than what happened,” a male voice declared, with a grave and deep voice.

“Mom, dad, I am here. Can you hear me? I am here,” Jerry shouted in the silence of his lungs.

“His family could not be here today, for reasons that we all acknowledge, but our hearts go out to them,” the voice continued.

“Is this a punishment for what I did? Just to speak a few words to another person?” Jerry asked in his mortal isolation.

“There was wrongdoing on his part, but perhaps we should consider the tremendous pressure he was forced into, the fear of the unknown and the uncertainty of a

situation that spoke for itself. How many humans could actually bear to continue like that? He tried and failed, but is he really to blame?”

Jerry could clearly listen to the monologue, which started to sound more like a trial than a funeral sermon.

“Please, whoever is doing this to me, please I appeal to your goodness and ask for a second chance, I will never speak a word to anyone about what is happening,” Jerry prayed, this time with his thoughts without trying to speak, as he felt now that his message was heard loud and clear.

“We are not judges, we cannot replace the will of our Lord, therefore let’s leave to Him the difficult task of making the final judgment,” the voice concluded, while the cover of the coffin closed on Jerry’s face.

Hours went by and Jerry, in the silence of the darkness, couldn’t move or see, but his thoughts were running at the speed of light. Flashbacks recalled what had happened in the various rooms until even his brain froze to the present time, feeling the loneliness and the silence, surrounded by black.

He knew that he was still alive. He still felt an active part of a universe disconnected from his body, but very much alive inside him. Time passed on, and it was very long. No memories, no dreams, simply being there.

Suddenly the black around Jerry started to fade into a dark blue that clearly wasn’t the inside of a coffin anymore it felt more like an outdoor place. Jerry still couldn’t move, but his eyes witnessed the stars appearing in the blue that more and more was taking the shape of a nocturnal sky, while the comfort of grass began to work its way on his back. Trees grew really fast around him and his legs gained strength again, then his arms and



his hands started to feel the softness of the grass. Although he could, now he didn't want to move, feeling connected to the universe that was rapidly coming back to take him.

The stars gently transformed into lanterns floating in the air, while the trees took the shape of the doors. One by one all 27 came back to life in a circle, standing on the grass.

He tilted his body and then sat down, and right in front, golden and glowing, it was door "number 9" moving towards him, to stop just a few feet from him and open.

Jerry walked into the door, which closed and disappeared. The other doors remained in position, all brown and dark, except for the door "number 1" that now was red. It went on fire and loud screams came out of the flames.

#### Door 9: The reverse of 6

A man/woman is nothing without the continuation of his/her species. Legacy is what connects the generations and the difference between hatred and love is what defines them.

In Tampa the weather is usually very hot, with the exception of maybe two or three weeks, when the temperature falls and there is some frost. Beside the high degrees, what really makes it unbearable to walk outside is the humidity, that same humidity that Jerry was experiencing again.

Back to Tampa, he recognized the buildings and the streets, even the houses and

the palm trees lined up in the median. And this time he was not alone. Eating an ice cream and holding his hand, it was the child with the evil eyes that stared at him from across the courtyard, now sweet and smiling to Jerry.

“So do you like your ice cream?” Jerry asked, ignoring the feeling warning him of the terrible glance that boy had given earlier.

“Yes, indeed. I enjoy it very much. It was very kind and considerate of you.” The kid surprised Jerry.

He had no idea when and how he bought the ice cream, but mostly he was shocked by the manners of the young boy that although very well spoken, could have not been older than eight or nine at the most.

“Do you want to see my school? I am very excited about your visit; it doesn’t happen very often that people take their time to spend with me. You will love our playground, and Ms. Tevez is so nice. She is our teacher and likes to spend long hours with us. She takes us to school trips and even to the movies. She is very pleasant.” The kid kept on talking like an adult and yet firmly holding Jerry’s hand. “My mom died in childbirth, and I never met my dad. He died in some sort of a boat accident, but I never believed that story. I think he ran on us. How can someone be so mean? I am not a bad boy.” Jerry felt his hand being squeezed and his heart weakened listening to the orphan, however that was the same kid that earlier on seemed possessed by the devil in person.

Jerry decided to stop walking and sat down on a bench nearby.

“We’ll be late to school,” the kid said worriedly.

“It’s OK, I will talk to your teacher. What I am about to tell you is very important,

and you must hear me very carefully. I am deeply sorry about your mother, and I don't know what happened to your father, but now, my dear boy, this is not important. You are here alive and in good health and your entire life is ahead of you. You are very young, but I think that you can understand me when I say that your future is up to you. We are capable of amazing things as human being and we should never lose track of our actions, never, even when things get tough. You are a smart kid, always follow the good in you, that little voice that talks to you." Jerry spoke from his heart.

Without responding the boy hugged Jerry. Then the two walked to the school, and an attendant made sure that the kid went to his class, while Ms. Tevez from a window thanked Jerry, who replied smiling back at her. She was the same lady that he met on the swing and needless to say the school was the same as well, with the playground, the swing and of course the sand.

Jerry stood in front of the school gate and waited for door number 10 that he knew would have soon arrived, as it did. And Jerry was gone again.

#### Door 10: Air Strike

The room was so small that Jerry had barely space to turn. There was a mirror and everything was minimal. It took him a couple of minutes to realize that the small room was indeed a bathroom.

"Once again a door is connected to a bathroom," Jerry thought.

The whole room took a sudden fall, then a strong turn, which made Jerry lose his balance. Once he regained his position, Jerry decided that it was time to open the door, and after four or five attempts, the door was opened.

A long aisle was in front of him, with seats in rows, left and right. Many people were sitting, when a woman in uniform walked towards him.

“Sir, please return to your seat and fasten your belt. There is some turbulence and the captain has turned the belt sign on.”

Jerry walked to the first seat available and sat down. He tried to fasten the seat belt, but again the task wasn't exactly the easiest. As he was trying to find a way to put his seat belt on, two hands reached out and locked the belt.

“I always have hard time with these myself,” said a friendly little old man sitting by the window.

“It's my first time on a plane,” Jerry replied promptly.

The old man looked at him with strange curiosity, behind his round spectacles, then smiled again, betraying some missing teeth on the back of his mouth.

“Experiencing many first times lately, I bet!” He said sarcastically.

“Life is an ever-going learning experience, I guess.”

“Well not experiences like that, definitely not,” the old man said staring at Jerry in the eyes. “Flying is an attempt to reach a place that is out of reach. See the sky, it gets closer but we can't reach it.”

“Well, what about the Apollo? It reached the sky.” Jerry asked convinced, ignoring that he was in 2009 and that many space shuttles had flown since the Apollo program.

“Well did it really reach the sky now?” the man asked ironically. “It flew through it, and the astronauts went from seeing blue above to seeing blue underneath, but they didn’t reach it, did they?”

“They reached the Moon,” Jerry said proudly.

“Yes the Moon they did, but not the sky my dear, not the sky.” There was a moment of pause. “See, it’s like having several doors and having to pick the one to enter. Once you choose to enter, you pass to another place, but can you really tell that you reached the door?”

The odds of the man referring to random doors now were too obvious to go unnoticed.

“I didn’t know that you could choose the door,” Jerry went along.

“Of course you can, you can always choose in life. Aren’t we the master of our actions?” The old man didn’t speak further, instead he took a newspaper and started reading, his face disappearing among the large pages.

“The serial killer has killed again,” a boldface title stated on the front page. Jerry wanted to ask a question, but hesitated. The man, whose face was still deeply hidden by the paper, said, “Yes my dear?”

Jerry heard the voice coming from beyond the paper; was the man reading his mind?

“Who are you?” Jerry asked directly.

“I am nobody, just flying home for Thanksgiving.”

The man kept on reading and didn’t pay any attention to Jerry for the remainder of the flight, and actually he even rudely rushed over him, hitting him with his bag at the

arrival, in an attempt to get off the plane before it was possible.

Jerry instead walked in a normal way towards the main door of the plane. A friendly smile from the flight attendant, and then two people in army uniform walked towards him, grabbing him on each side. They carried him for a few steps, then they threw him forward, very strongly, to the point that Jerry almost flew, before falling on the floor. He turned and all the passengers were gone, the two soldiers were now a number 11. Jerry closed his eyes, and there he was in the middle of the circle of the 27 doors.

#### Door 11: Three is a pair

One of the things that are common all over the world, that doesn't make any distinction between sexes, religions, races or political views, or if you are rich or poor, is the fact that regardless of attention and personal order, one sock always gets lost, no matter what. It is truly a nervewracking experience, where life seems to be a big game set up to fool us. A pair of socks can be our biggest enemy and yet they mean no harm, it's only our psychological behavior that makes them so powerful.

Jerry never really had that problem, as socks and clothing had not exactly been a main concern for him until that moment, when in a very bizarre way, he started to interact with real life situations that made him taste existence like nothing had before.

For many years his parents had tried to give content to his dreams and sensations, but their words could never come close to experiencing fresh air, walking down a street

or simply smelling the ocean.

However, a pair of number “1” started moving from the door and placed themselves right in front of him, while getting bigger in size. As their dimensions changed, at the same time and with the same speed, the door behind began to fade, revealing a very long tunnel, dark and apparently endless. Jerry hesitated to walk in, until the two numbers “1” shrank into half of the size and floated in the air, returning one on each side of the tunnel, transforming in two torches.

Jerry walked, but he couldn’t enter the tunnel. There were no barriers, yet right on the edge of the entrance, some sort of power kept him out. On the third attempt, the torch on the right dramatically expanded its flame. Jerry by instinct took the torch on his hand and suddenly he was able to proceed. The tunnel was very dark, and the torch seemed to be the only source of light.

The tunnel kept on going, but what really impressed Jerry was the total silence. Then a light breath of wind put out the flame, and a long glowing line appeared on the floor. A directional arrow clearly indicated that the line had to be followed, so Jerry trusted the sign and walked in total blindness. The line kept on stretching and Jerry, fearless followed it all the way, when the pointing arrow turned into a flashing circle. He walked and stood right in the middle of it. Three big mirrors suddenly appeared in front of him and his face was reflected in each one of them but with a peculiar characteristic. The one to the left had him as a young boy, the one in the middle had him in present time, and the one on the right portrayed him as an old man.

The three reflections spoke together, “Welcome Jerry!”

Then only the image in the middle kept on talking: “We are three versions of yourself, at different times in your life, but you and we are together, we share the same energy, you and we are like a couple. One day you will know better, but for the time being, we invite you to choose one of us to continue your journey.”

The reflection stopped talking and remained in silence, eyes shut, like the other two. Jerry wasn’t sure on what to do and, giving complete authority to his gut feeling, walked towards the middle mirror that had spoken. As he touched it, the mirror became a strange gel and turned into water, which drained in a matter of seconds, allowing Jerry to see one of the most beautiful sights that he had ever seen.

## Door 12: An International Twist

Jerry was standing right on a patio of an exclusive hotel. At a first look, Jerry estimated the hotel to have no more than 12 rooms. There were a swimming pool and palm trees all around, and a long garden extending all the way to a sand beach facing three islands.

A young black guy was trying to catch one the waves with his surfboard. It was early in the morning, but people were already populating the beach, and carts filled with food and all sorts of merchandise began to appear. However, the sound of the sea was the only thing that Jerry could hear.

Then Mrs. Randolph, a woman in her mid-seventies, medium size, light reddish dyed short hair, round sunglasses like the cheeks, which shaped her face like a number 8,



walked by Jerry. Besides a light yellow sweater, open at the front, betraying a discreet bikini underneath, she wore a pair of very elegant white linen bermuda shorts with matching shoes. She was also carrying a large white purse, and a large hat, white as well, protected her head from the sun that was growing stronger.

As she walked, she kept on turning around, slowly, almost as if checking her territory and the people. She looked at Jerry a couple of times, keeping her face still. Her breakfast was waiting on the table by the pool; she sat, and after another glance at her surroundings, started to eat, silently and alone.

A young man, with darker skin, dressed all in white, with a blue cap said, “Bom dia.”

Jerry replied with a smile. The young man kept on walking to attend Mrs. Randolph, avoiding a potentially very embarrassing language conflict.

One of the things that Jerry had done with his mom during his long days in Baltimore was to listen to foreign languages, and learn basic sentences and greetings. Then he would associate the language with the countries that spoke it. He always found it amusing and laughed with all his innocence in listening to how differently people communicated.

He knew without any doubts that “Bom dia” was Portuguese, no confusion with Spanish or Italian. Now the real issue was, Portuguese from where? His gut feeling excluded Portugal, as well as Cape Verde and Mozambique, leaving Brazil as his first choice.

A poster of the upcoming Brazilian Carnival 2009 confirmed his deduction and

also revealed the current year. Once again, he was in the future, but this time in a foreign country.

More than half an hour passed, and Jerry was still standing on the same spot. Mrs. Randolph, however, was done with her breakfast, and walked towards him.

“Hello young man”, she spoke with a perfect British accent, which seemed to be almost out of place in a context of screaming and surfing people.

She stared at him back waiting for an answer.

“How come you spoke English to me?” he asked firmly.

“Well Jerry, what else should I be speaking to you?”

‘She knows who I am,’ Jerry thought, without expressing any emotions, and challenging her, but her eyes were too friendly to carry on a confrontation.

She sat down, and ordered two cups of tea.

“I know you have so many questions. Don’t worry, the real matter is the journey that you are doing, because at the end, the answers will be still be there, but your questions will change radically.”

The tea brought Jerry back to the cottage, and to the night of passion he had.

“Well I am sure the tea she served you was better than this, but you must know that the Portuguese princess Caterina da Braganza introduced the tea to England, and by the same token the Portuguese brought it here in Brazil; so don’t let the surroundings fool you, because there is more than meets the eye.”

Jerry remained in silence, sipping his tea, afraid now to talk about his situations.

“Don’t be scared, this is not a test, I am actually one of the few you can talk to. I have been with you since you were born. I cried with your mom when you were put on

that machine, and I have followed you step by step so far.”

She stopped talking, stared him in the eyes, and with a very serious tone added, “Yes, my child, even inside the first door I was with you.”

“Who are you?” Jerry asked without showing any emotion.

“You should not worry about who I am, but rather what you are doing. Many recurring elements have been presented to you, and you still are not going in the right direction.”

Jerry now noticed a beautiful girl, with olive skin, staring at him all the way from the beach.

“See!” Mrs. Randolph added ignoring the girl. “You are a man capable of making his choices, but you must follow your path.”

Jerry was still staring at the girl, but just when he turned back to Mrs. Randolph, the British lady was gone, and a few feathers fell on the table. He noticed that there was only one cup of tea, and the chair in front of him was well under the table, as if no one had sat there. Right across the patio, Mrs. Randolph was finishing her coffee, reading a book, and completely ignoring Jerry’s presence.

A few hours went by and nothing happened. Mrs. Randolph was long gone. The cup of tea was still in front of him, it was like he was there but forgotten by everyone around. He started to scream and jumped on the table, calling for attention, but before he could even finish his scream, it was suddenly night. Dance music was playing and the girl from the beach was dancing by the table, looking at him.

Jerry stepped down from the table and the girl took his hand and walked him to the sea. As they walked on the beach, the girl kept on holding his hand with both of hers.

She didn't speak a word, but wouldn't let Jerry's hand go, almost as if she was his and had been for years. Jerry looked into her green eyes and saw the reflection of the moon there, and she finally spoke with a splendid strong Brazilian accent.

"Everyone who dies come back as a spirit and reincarnates into something else, spirit always stick around with the same spirits, but their bodies change every time. You are here for a reason, and you must know it before it's too late. In your country today it is a very superstitious day."

"Why?" Jerry asked surprised.

"Porque e' a sexta 13."

"It's what?" He asked in total darkness.

"Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>." She replied, as everything began to spin, and a very tall 13 of fire came from the sea, fast and rushing towards the beach.

Door 13: "1 and 3, I already told you your life belongs to me"

Jerry was forced to lay down completely naked on icy cold stone, in total darkness. He could make small moves, but his hands and feet were fastened tightly to heavy chains that made a very loud noise every time he tried to free himself, causing scratches on his back, and bleeding.

"Don't you think I forgot door '1' little bastard," an arrogant male voice spoke, out of the darkness.

Then a sharp blade slowly began to slice his skin, very lightly, with little pain, but

consistently, and in different parts of the body.

“Let me get something straight, your soul is mine, so don't be fooled.”

A long silence followed, and a cold wind started to blow on him, lifting him up, but the chains forced him down, hitting the stone over and over.

After minutes or hours, Jerry lost his senses.

Door 14: Mommy loves you very much.

Jerry opened his eyes. The pain was gone and so the scratches. He was inside a bed with an Indiana Jones blanket. A plastic gun with a plastic police shield and many police themed toys were all around him. He had the hands of a child, and after a fast check on his body, he realized that he was indeed a child. He jumped out of bed, rushed out the door, and there she was, the woman from Central Park.

“Well what's gotten into you? Why are you never so excited when it's time to go to school? Dad fixed the kite for you, and although he must work today, we are going to have a great day at the park.”

Jerry knew whose body he was in, but could not really understand why, when a strange feeling took over him: the happiness of having the opportunity to run as a kid, chasing a kite.

The kite was flying high, when he lost control of it, and there it happened. A hand stained with blood caught his kite, and a man wearing a dirty p.j. saying Houston Oilers

gave ~~back~~ the kite to him. An evil smile on the man's face made Jerry take the kite and run away.

He saw from a distance Jane talking to the man; he saw Jane talking to himself. The ride in the car to the police station was very scary, Jerry sat in the back seat, while his older self kept on talking to Jane, and from time to time he would look from rear mirror into his eyes. Indeed a devilish look came out every time, and little Jerry felt a chill right on his backbone.

At the police station, through a glass window, he saw the man in Jane's husband's office.

Back in the car, Jerry finally spoke his first words, "Who was that man, mom?" He asked with fear in his voice.

"He is a nice man that saved your kite sweetie, and now dad is helping him," she answered with love.

"But, why was he wearing dirty clothes, and his hands had blood on them?" This time Jerry was trying to obtain information, overcoming his fear.

"Well, I don't know sweetie, sometimes adults play games that are hard to explain, and they get injured, just like you, when you fell from the bike the other day."

Jerry realized that he never rode a bike in his life, and wondered how it would feel. Then, Jane pulled off the highway on exit "15." Just the time to hear the woman's voice saying, "remember that mommy loves you very much," and a very loud Spanish song started playing on his head.

## Door 15: Blood and arena

The music went straight to Jerry's brain. As he tried to understand where it came from, he noticed a white wire coming down from his ear and going into his left pocket. He followed the wire, and right in the middle there was a small button that he pushed, making the music even louder, so he jumped, and pulled the wire, accidentally unplugging it from his pocket, and the music stopped at once. He put it in his hand and pulled out a strange rectangular device, with a half eaten apple drawn on it.

Once again, Jerry landed in a bathroom that he recognized as from the gas station. Looking at himself into the mirror, he saw the face of the Andalusian man, and he was now inside his body. He opened the backpack he was carrying, and that started to feel heavy on his shoulder. But to his surprise, when he opened it, it was totally empty, although still very heavy to lift. He put his hand inside, and couldn't feel anything. He searched it more, and absolutely nothing was there. Then he felt a little bump on a side internal pocket, and just inside it there was a very small rosary, made of wood, which smelled of olive oil. The bag was now very light.

Jerry put the rosary, at this point also very light, in his pocket, and left the bag there. He walked towards the parking lot, just in time to see the bus for D.C. taking off. He turned around, looking for any sign, when a female voice talked to him.

It was Lucy Beth, older but definitely her.

"Well, nice to see you again," she said in total comfort. Jerry knew right away that she was not referring to their meeting at the tavern, so he concluded that she must have met the Andalusian man sometime in her life. He looked at her with an intense

glance, like the first time he saw her, then a bunch of screaming teenagers drove by in a utility car with “sweet 16” written on the windows.

Suddenly he was standing in the circle of doors right in front of number “16,” wearing his Oiler p.j, and as the door turned into a mirror, he saw himself back inside his natural body.

#### Door 16: Lucy Lucky 7 no more

Silence and total darkness fell upon the circle, except for a golden door with a number “16” made out of little diamonds shining in the middle. Jerry had his hands in his pocket, when he felt a strong burning pain on his right hand. A big Lucky Seven logo, just like the one he saw at Lucy's bar, appeared as a fiery mark on his skin. Blood began to come out and the logo disappeared, taking the pain away; and the door was now open.

Jerry walked through it, and as he felt sand underneath his feet, his body had changed again. He recognized the elementary school in Tampa, and the body was definitely a woman's, and although he had no mirror, he knew it to be the teacher's. The lovely southern lady, who had greeted him in the previous doors, was now growing within him, with a darker connotation, and a very despicable desire to hurt the kid.

Jerry at first didn't know how to react to it, because his sense of reality forced him into a limbo where he was sharing a body with the teacher. She was actually talking to him, using her mouth, and Jerry could only answer using the very same mouth, in an oral battle that lasted for a long while.



“He is evil, and he will create lots of pain, and deep sorrow to the ones around him. If we kill him, door number “1,” will be erased, and the horrible things that happened in there will be forgotten, and disappear forever.”

She opened the drawer on her desk, and took out a pair of long scissors, prepared to wait for the kids to be gone, and quietly corner the young one, and simply take his life away. Somehow, Jerry knew that the kid must indeed not be touched. He felt a profoundly evil spirit in the teacher, and responded strongly, “I know how you really are, and my mind and soul will fight you.”

#### Door 17: A new game

Jerry was thrown in the middle of the circle with all the doors surrounding him, wearing his original Houston Oiler outfit. The little devil was facing him.

“Jerry dear, your life goes on, and my spirit plays. Do you think you know what only I can decide? Life and death mean no more, bets are off, and a new game begins now.”

A strongly evil look came from his eyes directly into Jerry's soul. Jerry was scared, really scared.

The doors faded one by one alongside the little devil, until only one door was left, a big wide dark entrance rather, with rocks around it, almost like a cave, a very dark cave, breathing terror, and slowly sucking Jerry in. Jerry tried to resist, pointing his feet toward the ground, but all was futile. In a matter of moments, he reached the edge of the cave,

revealing a very deep cliff inside, and he fell on the hard ground, breaking his leg and hitting his head on a rock. He remained unconscious for a very long time.

As the pain from the broken leg grew, Jerry regained his consciousness. The lady from the cottage was taking care of him, cleaning the blood from his head, holding his leg.

“This is broken, I need to take you to a doctor.”

But Jerry could not see any way out of there. The cave seemed to be vast, and pitch black. The door was gone, and above him there was just the dark ceiling of the cave, cold and very silent. The lady look at Jerry in the eyes, and with a lovely touch, caressed his leg, and the leg was healed.

“How did you do that?” Jerry asked, surprised.

She didn't respond.

“Is this Hell?” Jerry screamed.

“If being separated from those we love is Hell, then my answer is yes, we are in Satan's kingdom.” She replied, entering in some sort of trance.

Jerry didn't like that answer at all. He was not scared now, but very upset.

“Well, I don't intend to stay here more than I have to. My real life has been hell since I can remember, but not now. No! This is it. It's time to change all of this.”

Jerry stood up, and started to walk, then suddenly fell.

“See, your leg was broken, I healed it; but he is almighty and can break it again at any time.”

“There is only one almighty in my prayers, and certainly isn't a loser with red skin and horns. There is nothing your almighty can do to me, more than he has already.”

“Trust me, he can do things to you that you can't even imagine; that you don't even know exist. Picture your darkest fear and multiple it by a billion.” The lady spoke from her trance.

“Try to live your entire life inside a pumping iron lung,” Jerry replied “and being able to catch a glimpse of real life just from a small angle of your eyes. I am sorry, but fears are caused by ourselves, they are Trojan horses to the Devil, and I will not let him inside me.”

“Hahaha,” a satanic laugh echoed from the depth of the cave. “You think you know it all, that you are so smart.”

Jerry was forced to the ground by an unknown power and his pants started to rip followed by his skin. Blood came out, and his bare flesh appeared. Then the lady in total trance walked toward him, and threw some salt on his wound. The pain was horrifying, and the little devil started to jump on his chest, with his long toenails right inside the wounds. And the evil laugh became stronger. Jerry was in pain, his face was red, and he could barely talk, but he found the strength to do it.

“I am so happy to hear your laughter, because if you are real and exist, this means that God is also real, and therefore here protecting me from you. But, I go even further. If I am here, it means that my job is to rescue your soul. Come out! It's time you revert to your destiny.”

A strong heat came from his pocket, and then a beautiful greenish fluorescent light. The rosary from the Andalusian man's bag slowly appeared. The rosary began floating in the air, while the little devil ran away like a little rat, and the lady faded away.

Silence was strong in the cave. No evil laughs, just the floating rosary, and the

pain was gone. Then, gently the rosary began moving. As in a dance, it crossed over in the middle, almost like an 8. Meanwhile, the cross lifted right next to it, shaping an 18. And, there it was, the eighteenth door.

#### Door 18: Our Lady

Jerry was still lying down, but underneath he could feel sand, with a very bright and warming light above him. He touched the ground and realized it was not sand, but moistened earth. He sat enjoying the light. A small creek ran nearby, until, as if in a painting, the water stopped running, the grass stopped moving, and even the wind stopped blowing.

A warm female voice spoke to his heart. Jerry was wearing a dark suit, with black tie and black shoes.

“Welcome Jerry, do you know who I am?” The lady spoke with candor.

“Are you Mary?” Jerry replied with love and excitement.

“Your heart guides you well,” the Virgin Mary said, appearing in all her splendor and purity. “What you did in the cave was very brave, and now you know that all the prayers and your grandfather’s rosary protected you because I was on your side all this time.”

“You mean in the doors, or before that?” Jerry asked.

“All along, and everywhere. We are all around you.”

Her words faded out, while the rosary gently landed around his neck, and the

Lady was gone, just as she appeared.

The rosary was hot, and as Jerry lifted it from his chest, he noticed a small burn, in the form of the number 19.

### Door 19: The serial killer strikes again

The passage through door “19” had been very different from what Jerry had experienced so far. After the blessed vision of the Virgin Mary, his body started to transform into millions of fluorescent flying microspheres, although it kept its motor skills and use of the five senses. All the atoms regrouped, forming his body a few hours later, right in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue. He didn't enter, opting instead for a walk. That was actually a bad choice on his part, because he had been sent to that specific place for a reason, but he simply wasn't ready yet.

Snow started to fall. It was very cold, and when the wind decides to breeze through the avenues of the Big Apple, there is very little anyone can do, except for hot drinks and staying inside. Regardless of the snow and weather conditions, people seemed to be walking up and down, keeping on with their daily activities as usual.

Always wearing the usual Houston Oiler outfit, he was walking down Broadway just north of Times Square.

As he passed by the David Letterman theatre, wondering why that guy deserved such big letters, Jerry reached into his pocket, and found the rosary. At that point the

words of the Virgin Mary echoed in his head: “The rosary your grandfather gave to you.” But he got the rosary from the Andalusian man, so how could Mary be wrong? Who was Jerry to contradict the mother of Jesus? Then again, he had no recollection of that rosary, except for finding it in an empty backpack.

Based on these thoughts, he began to fear that his vision had indeed been a figment of his imagination; and, although he still kept his Catholic beliefs, he wondered if perhaps some, if not all, of the experiences of that incredible journey were not real.

However, it certainly felt real when two big men in police uniform threw him on the ground and arrested him, in front of hundreds of people. And for the first time, his face touched the snow, and he thought of Baltimore when, through the window, he used to measure with his eyes the inches of snow left on branch of the tree, and the birds would cease singing, since they were gone, waiting to come back in the warmer months.

David was sipping his fourth large coffee from his David Letterman NYPD mug, in the room with another police detective, looking at a big map on the wall of the Northeast of the United States, featuring big red handwritten circles around the urban areas of four major Cities: Washington D.C., Philadelphia, New York and Boston. Inside each of the circles there were pins, and David was about to add a red one on highway 95, just outside of Newark.

“This son of bitch killed Lucy Beth Wilson, native of Texas, right in this gas station,” David said, pinning the point on the map, “in the middle of the day, with hundreds of people around.” he paused in discomfort, sipping again from the mug.

“The woman was killed with a poisoned needle just outside a McDonald's, but we

have no visual of the two together,” added Lt. Solomon, a young self-motivated detective, “the man carried his backpack from the Greyhound bus, entered the McDonald...”

“...and never got out of it,” David interrupted her, “although we found his bag in the public bathroom with a chopped female head inside, and no trace of this freaking asshole.”

“Every witness from the bus confirmed that the bag belonged to him,” Solomon continued, handing him a set of pictures of a man coming down from the bus and heading to McDonald's, with a backpack and generic Apple headset on his ears.

The man was Victor Garcia from Andalusia, but no one at the police station could have known that.

“Let's play the whole video once again,” ordered David.

The lights were dimmed in the room, and a VHS video from the gas station internal security system started to play. The quality was not the best, but it was in color, and the detectives could see a Greyhound bus stopping in the parking lot, and shortly after a bunch of passengers coming down, among them Victor headed to McDonald's.

“He enters the restaurant, and, our friends downstairs edited the video for us, adding the footage from the security camera inside the McDonald's; as you can see he goes out the back door heading to the public restrooms.”

“Why would he bother entering McDonald's and not even use their facility? It makes no sense,” David inquired.

“It does if he walked through the restaurant to reach the gas pumps. From the parking lot is a shorter walk,” noted Solomon.

“Are you suggesting he didn't go to the public bathrooms first?”

“From inside the bus, he must have had a clear vision of the area. We found the car of the victim unlocked at the pump with all her documents and wallet, and she had just filled her tank. Thus, if she walked away, it had to be to go to pay, since no credit card was used. Therefore leaving her wallet behind is a clear proof that someone forced her to go elsewhere, since she never made it back to the car. Of course, unfortunately the camera system at the pumps was malfunctioning, and we have no visual of that particular section,”

“He must have killed her either at the pump or closer to the public restrooms, and walked holding her body into the men's bathroom, and there he chopped her head off -- since we found the decapitated body in the stall, and the backpack nearby,” David commented.

“Let's watch the end of the video one more time, to make sure he never made it back to the bus,” Solomon suggested, as she hit the play button.

Every passenger returned, and then the bus remained still for a few minutes, at which point a man came out.

“Rewind that,” David yelled. “That man, I know him.”

Solomon paused the image, and froze the frame for a print.

“This man? Are you sure?” Solomon acted surprised.

“He was here just a couple of hours ago, wearing the same clothes,” David kept on yelling, puzzled by the situation.

“Who is he?” Solomon asked, trying to make sense of the new event.

“Someone, who died 20 years ago, but never mind that now. Get him here. He



must still be in the city,” David ordered, leaving no room for discussion.

The two huge oversized cops had taken Jerry in custody, brusquely indicating to him that he was expected at the police station. Jerry had no idea why the police suddenly had such interest on him, but following his instinct and the experience acquired so far, he let the flow guide the action, once again failing to understand that he had an option to act upon his reactions. But then again, maybe he felt that with the police wasn't the right time to start experimenting.

The handcuffs were tight, as Jerry was read his rights, and rapidly taken to the police station, under arrest.

It took him a few seconds to realize that the year must have been close to the ones from the previous times he was at the same station, and indeed the familiar furniture and decoration supported his idea.

“Well, well. Look who's back. Couldn't stay away more than a few hours, could you?” A very angry David confirmed that the year, and the day were the same. Regardless of the snow outside in contrast with the spring weather of the two prior New York visits. But since in the iron lung, the change of seasons was his intimate date with nature, he thought that was a sign from the dwarf, or maybe the Virgin Mary.

Jerry looked at David. “Can you kindly explain the reason for all of this?”

“I'll be glad to do so, please step into my office, but you know the way already, don't you?” Sarcastically David forced Jerry to enter the room, still escorted by the two policemen.

Solomon was sitting on one of the chairs; ready to reveal the file they had on him.

Jerry sat down there next to her, noticing right away the Letterman's mug sitting on David's desk, while one of the officers removed the handcuffs, leaving him alone in the room with the detectives.

“Am I accused of something specific?” Jerry asked politely.

“We ask the questions,” David stopped him.

“Do you understand that you have the right to call an attorney?” Solomon said, following the rules by the book, and receiving a very upset look from David.

“I don't need any assistance, I trust you guys. It's just that I've never been arrested before,” Jerry answered peacefully.

“Well, that's a good start,” David said, ready to eat his prey. “I really have only one question, and on your answer depends the rest of your life,” David sentenced firmly.

Solomon, without adding any word, laid in front of Jerry the photos of him getting off the Greyhound bus in front of the McDonald's. Then she played the video.

“Can you tell us in your own words why a man, supposedly dead, with no apparent current identity, happened to be at a murder location, wearing the same outfit from a team that left the NFL years ago?”

“A murder?” Jerry inquired in shock.

“Yes, and the victim happened to be a nice lady from Texas, just like your beloved Oilers, that are putting you in a lot of trouble, my friend,” David stared at him.

“Lucy Beth,” slipped from Jerry's lips.

David and Solomon in total disbelief froze.

“You knew her?” They screamed simultaneously.

## Door 20: 2.0 More than just a new Internet

The monitor of the computer in the room flashed in front Jerry's eyes, and he was thrown back to the circle, this time very bright, with luminescent electronic lines coming and going from a large rectangle standing at a far distance. It looked like a vertical motherboard, which was turning blue, while the lines on both sides of it were regrouping, taking the form of a big “2” and a “0.” leaving the blue shape in the middle.

At that point Jerry knew the drill, and he walked straight with no fear into the unknown.

His hands were different, revealing another change of body, but this time he felt accustomed to it, as if he had been there already.

Definitely, he did not recognize the room, which seemed to be from a college dorm. Two empty beds, Playmate posters on the walls, a bunch of Budweiser bottles, and a big mess of dirty clothes and books scattered all over.

He was sitting at one of the two desks in the room, in front of a computer featuring the Google search engine's main page, and at the bottom of the screen he spotted the half bitten apple again.

Jerry stared at it, without making sense of it, but mostly he was worried about understanding who he was, and why he was there.

He walked around the room snooping for clues, but couldn't find anything worth a second look. There was a mirror, and at least he could see his face. He must be no older than 21, tall and well built with short dark hair. And yet his piercing eyes were very familiar. He was also wearing a shirt saying “Bulls” in solid green.

Jerry kept on looking around and then returned to the computer, and to that intriguing word Google. The overall look of the software design was very different from the yellow or green letters on a black screen that he was used to back at his house.

The machine was clearly used for something different than just computing and programming, but the difficult part was to understand how to use it.

The first approach with the mouse was a disaster. Controlling the cursor was more difficult than the actual first step he took on his own legs. But then again, a little flashing arrow couldn't stop somebody who went through time traveling, and experienced an enormous amount of adventures in such a brief time frame. So, after removing both hands from the mouse, and using only his right hand, soon he was able to master the direction of that little device.

Besides being able to move around the white screen, he didn't see much use to it. He read, "search with Google," but as yet he had no idea what that meant.

He was about to give up, when he hit the keyboard strongly, and by touching several keys, ended up typing in the search box, and there it was, an unknown word as if by miracle appeared.

Once he made the connection on how to use the keyboard in relation to the search box, everything else started to become natural and intuitive.

The first thing to search that came into his mind was the Houston Oilers, and to his surprise he learned that they were no more. The name, the colors and even the city had been changed; they were now the Tennessee Titans. No wonder everyone was giving him a dirty look.

Anyway, this Google thing seemed to be a very powerful tool to find important

information, and an all-new world opened in front of his eyes. He learned that America was attacked on September 11, 2001, that Bush was not one President, but actually a father and son both elected to the presidential office, and ultimately that Obama was indeed the first black and current U.S. president. Somehow that powerful machine must be able to find the current date, he thought, and after a further search he located it on the monitor: April 14th, 2012.

While he started to adjust to the idea of being in that year, a ringing noise came from the computer, with a number “1” and the image of an envelope saying “incoming mail.”

Without knowing any better, he opened the e-mail and read it:

**“Hey Phil,**

**I hope that you are finally settling in Tampa. I can't deny that I am still uneasy to know you there, after all that city cost us. One day it will all be behind us, but for now, my son, enjoy college, take this opportunity, and make the best of your life, just as your dad would like to see you doing. I look forward to seeing you in New York for Thanksgiving, and I am very proud that you chose criminology as your major. Although our family gave more than we had to the police department, I am fully supportive of your decision to join them after your degree.**

**Love, Mommy.”**

Jerry immediately googled “Bulls Florida,” and the University of South Florida came up. He was in Tampa again.

The room began spinning very fast while he was still at the desk. The whole thing lasted a few seconds that seemed long minutes, but when it finally stopped, Jerry was in the same unknown body, now wearing winter clothes, and sitting inside an apartment bedroom, still facing a computer. The room was very familiar, even if the furniture was different. Then the police shield and a kite attached to the ceiling gave it away. He looked at the date right away; it had changed to “November 21st, 2012,” the day before Thanksgiving. A wild animated turkey was waving the number 21, and Jerry without further notice knew he had entered door 21.

#### Door 21: Lucy Beth and a legacy of Blood

“Phil? Would you come down? Supper is ready.” A female voice screamed from downstairs.

As soon as Jerry saw the woman, he recognized Jane from Central Park. The dining table was set for two, and a large portion of meatloaf was sitting on his plate.

“I made it just as you like it,” the woman said.

Jerry knew who he was, but then again had no clue on how to interact, considering that probably they had shared a great deal of things as mother and son, and he only knew about a kite almost lost, and a trip in the car. He felt that perhaps the best strategy was to simply let her talk, without much replying. But the next sentence caught

him by surprise.

“I think that if that kite had flown away, we would still be a happy family, and you would have grown up with a father.” She exploded crying.

“What do you mean?” Jerry replied, very confused.

“I am sorry honey, don't be alarmed, we went through this so many times, you know I don't imply any wrongdoing on your part. If anything, I blame myself. But, he seemed such a nice person, and he had already killed that poor woman, and when I learned who she was, I just could not believe it. That bastard was seeking his personal vendetta against Lucy, and the serial killer had nothing to do with him. Lucy was a single stand-alone homicide. And it wasn't even your dad's jurisdiction, why did he have to call him back in? Why did he have to kill him?” She kept on crying, while a large double vodka was gone.

Jerry rapidly computed Jane's words. And with all the strength of his self-conscious innocence said, “Mom, what if I tell you that I don't think the man from the kite has anything to do with dad's death?”

“What are talking about? A few weeks studying criminology, and you already think you're Sherlock Holmes,” she claimed, fixing herself another drink. “The guy stabbed your dad on the neck with a number 2 pencil, right in his office, in front of many witnesses, in broad day light. Kind of hard to believe he had nothing to do with your father's death,” she concluded, swallowing the vodka in one shot.

“Stop drinking, and listen to me carefully.”

“ You know I never drink,” she said upset.

“I need you lucid, please don't drink anymore”

“All right, Ellery Queen, what do you want to know?” She spoke, almost laughing in her growing sorrow.

“When you mentioned Lucy's name, you sounded like you knew her. Did you?” Jerry asked in a very serious tone.

“You know your dad and I met her once, several years before she was killed. I told you the story many times”.

“Please, tell me one more time. As I think that some more details might bring us closer to fully understand what happened.”

Jerry kept on going; he almost had a feeling that he knew what the lady was going to say next. Maybe, it was because some of Philip's recollections were alive in his brain, or maybe because Jerry was actually there the night the lady and her husband met Lucy.

“It was our wedding night, your dad and I drove to Texas to get married away from everyone. We wanted it to be our secret day, just for us to remember. We were married in a small Catholic chapel ministered by a former teacher of mine back in Boston. It was not much of a ceremony, we barely had money for food and gas, and as a matter of fact our reception was a few drinks in a local bar; the bar poor Lucy happened to own.”

The lady had tears on her eyes ready to come down.

“Mom, who else was there?” Jerry asked.

“I told you it was just your dad and I.”

“I mean in the bar, do you remember?” He continued asking with persistence.

“I can't say I do. There was a girl singing, and when we left Lucy gave us a bottle of wine.”



“Please try harder, was she alone when you guys left?” Jerry inquired almost crying himself.

“No, there was some football guy with her,” she replied.

“What do you mean by football guy? A player, a fan?” Jerry stared at her.

“That guy was wearing a...” she froze. “Oh God, nooo!” She screamed.

Jerry tried to hold the lady's hand, but he was sucked back into a vortex, and ended up back in the dorm room.

This time he was back as himself, wearing the Oilers outfit, sitting at the same computer, with a Yahoo page blinking in front of him.

“What on Earth is Yahoo now?” He typed 'Google' on the research box, and with a few clicks he was on familiar territory.

## Door 22: The day I died

The first thing that came into his mind was to type, “Lucy Beth Lucky Tavern homicide.”

The amount of material was beyond the expectations. Thus, he randomly opened the first article that actually seemed holding some substantial information.

He started scrolling down, and understood that had hit the jackpot.

**“...The killing of Lucy Beth remains as today one of the most violent crimes against a defenseless woman.**

**Lucy Beth, born in Austin, TX, was traveling on, 95 near Newark, when she met Victor Garcia, an American citizen born in Andalusia, Spain, but raised in America and who liked to imitate the Spanish accent to pretend to be foreigner.**

**Garcia killed and decapitated Lucy Beth in what still seems a very mysterious case, as the head was never found, and Garcia claims that he has no recollection of the matter, and denies his wrongdoing in all cases brought against him. Police detectives from NYPD considered Garcia the serial Killer of the Northeast, who for five years scared millions. However, the serial killer was identified as a different person still on the run, and acquainted of Garcia and some of the parties involved ...”**

Jerry read fast through the part explaining all their relations, and stopped when he read:

**“...in a moment of lucid criminal spirit, the man wearing the Houston Oilers outfit killed investigator David Johnston in his office, stabbing him several**

**times on the neck with a no. 2 pencil.”**

Jerry was shocked. He looked at his hands, and tried to understand the meaning of all of that.

The article ended:

**“...the man's true identity is unknown, and he is believed on the run and very dangerous, while fellow criminal Victor Garcia is going on trial for first degree murder.”**

Jerry had to stop his research, as things were getting too overwhelming, and it started to grow in him the doubt whether or not he could do something or if he were to be passive. The Virgin Mary told him to act, but he didn't know how, as everything seemed to getting way bigger than he could handle.

At this point he realized that although no one knew the identity of the mysterious Houston Oiler guy, he did, so he typed his own name, and the result was:

**“On November 11th 1978 Jerry Peterson died in his sleep at the age of 22, after touching the heart of every American, with his life spent inside an iron lung.”**

Pictures of Jerry were all over, including interviews with his parents, who according to “Google” were still alive. He noticed several videos featuring them on recent TV talk shows, and he cried listening to their voices, and looking at them in old age. He thought about the irony of that hi-tech generation that, even with all the visual content had never linked his name to the mystery man or noticed the resemblance, except for a guy in Oregon, famous for his conspiracy theories.

The sentence, “Died at the age of 22”, however, stuck with him the most, when an email arrived.

**“Well, yes 22 was your age of death, and for this door  
22, let's make you pass with no sorrow. But, be  
prepared because after the lucky 23; 24 is waiting to  
hurt you.”**

Jerry stood up, and screamed, “That's it, come out coward, enough with this, if you wanna fight, let's fight. If I am dead, I am as powerful as you, and if am alive, then you will not kill me that easy, nor I will let you kill other people.” He opened the door to walk out of the room, but instead of the campus, he found himself in Las Vegas by a roulette table, with the dealer announcing the number 23 as winning. And there he was, inside door “23.”

### Door 23: The Lucky Door

The hotel was the Luxor, which he found of particular interest especially for the curious shape of the building, being the inside of a very large pyramid. From there, he walked the entire Strip, back and forth, enjoying every single hotel, particularly being exposed to different styles and cultural environments, although fake and built for the tourists. Entering and exiting each resort was a reminder of the doors, where he could expect anything to happen.

Although apparently different, the hotels actually had three common denominators in the overall structure of the hotels: the entertainment area with large theaters and clubs; the shopping mall; and, of course, the gambling. It was a city geared towards families that showed a Disneyland side, pretty much absent in the Las Vegas Jerry had heard about back in the 70's, that he didn't really visit in the prior stop when he met Mark.

The parallelism with his own situation led him to think about what all the doors had in common. And the answer was almost automatic: the sense of a superior power controlling everything, a not well identified balance between good and evil, and a strong feeling of constant instability where everything could have been gone in a matter of seconds. Las Vegas indeed.

Deep in his thoughts, he ended up walking on a side street from the Strip, when he noticed a bar called "Taverna," which was an exact replica of Ms. Sullivan's place back on the fishermen's pier. Taken by a strong curiosity, he walked in.

The bar/restaurant even inside was identical to the original Taverna, but what was more striking were the photos of the fishermen Jerry had met and sailed with. The captain was big, in the middle of the main wall, followed by the others, and a very large painted version of the “Ginger.”

“Three is a charm,” a loud female voice called to Jerry.

Jerry turned, and without too much surprise, found Ms. Sullivan right behind him sitting at a slot machine that had just paid her \$2300.

The entire restaurant congratulated the old lady, and she received also a free apple pie. After the joy and the celebration, she asked for a glass of wine, and sat at the bar. Jerry sat right next to her.

“Hello Ginger. Do you remember me? Or should I call you Mary Ann?” Jerry tried his luck, challenging the power of the doors.

“You used to call me Ms. I knew you'd show up again, and there you are.” She said without even looking at Jerry.

“Do you know who I am?” Jerry asked a bit surprised, regardless of his getting used to the tricks of the strange environments surrounding him.

“How could I forget you? You won \$23,000 yesterday. I was at Mandalay when you hit the jackpot. Well, you brought me luck today, although I am in only for one tenth of your prize.” She said, throwing Jerry completely off track.

“What happened to the brunette, latina looking woman you were kissing all over?”

Jerry had no idea what Ginger was talking about.

“I am sorry. I remember very little from last night, but I have a feeling I know you

from before.”

“No honey. I never saw you before last night, nor your Ms. Tevez girlfriend who I don't see here today. Then again, nowadays I only recall the last party I had. And, that was last night with you and your girlfriend. Take a look at the menu. My treat. Today I can afford it.” She said with half smile on her face, handing a menu to Jerry.

“Do you own this joint?” Jerry asked trying to change subject, but also to gather more information.

“ ‘Used to, but I lost it all to a 'full house'. And my third life went down the drain.”

“Third life?” Jerry asked.

“I was happy once. Engaged to a fisherman, a captain of a boat rather,” she continued pointing at the photo on the wall, and waiving her finger showing that whatever he could see on the wall was her life. “He died on a fishing trip, some said caused by a curse from a dead widow, or some shit like that. Anyway, he left me with great sorrow, and a son I didn't know he had.”

“A son?” Jerry just realized he didn't know anything about the captain's personal life.

“Yes, apparently his dick paid regular visits to a lady in Spain, who gave birth to a wonderful kid, but she died in child birth, so my beloved fiancé left the kid in an orphanage in Tampa, Florida forgetting to mention this little detail to me, or to the kid for that matter. When the boat accident occurred, the anonymous checks stopped arriving in Tampa, and the social workers, after a detailed search were able to find his true identity.”

“You mean, he sent checks every month? And never saw the child?”

“Pretty much. I guess we all hide a dark side to our personality, and do unthinkable things.”

“What happened to the kid?”

“He is on death row now for a first degree brutal murder.”

Jerry started to sweat, and feeling sick in the stomach.

“What is his name?”

“He was all over the news for a long time. ‘The American with the fake Spanish accent’ His name is Victor Garcia, after his mom Victoria Garcia.”

Jerry drank a large glass of water to calm down, then asked Mary Ann, “and you never had any contact with the kid?”

“No, I didn't know he even existed until I read in the paper that he had killed someone. Many stories filled the media at the time, so I learned how he was somehow a sort of my stepson, but I was already living my second life here in Nevada, running a whorehouse, and I didn't feel that he was really my problem to deal with.” She concluded, finishing her second drink.

Of course what Jerry didn't know was that he was back into Philip's body, but he didn't bother checking himself in a mirror, as he was too busy listening to the story.

Jerry's eyes went to the “24 hours open kitchen” written on the front of the menu and, without any transaction, he felt something wet in his mouth.



## Door 24: The evil in me

Jerry felt a tremendous pleasure on his tongue, as a naked Ms. Tevez was kissing him, making love to him, showing a very different side from the timid elementary school teacher he grew to know on “his short visits to Tampa.” She was probably in her forties now, and her body was very fit. They made intense love until they both fell dead tired into each other's arms.

“If the Dean finds out, I am going to get fired. I worked so hard to get a teaching job at college level, and now I am seriously risking to jeopardize everything, but you are worth every minute of the risk honey. I love you.” She said, walking to the bathroom. “Care to join me in the shower?”

“Give me a moment, I will be right there,” Jerry replied digesting the latest turmoil of events.

First, he had to think that for the second time he had been with a woman, and this time the experience was way more physical, and secondly, what was he doing in bed with Ms. Tevez?

By the time he stood up from the bed, and looked at his naked body, he knew it wasn't actually his.

“Philip, are you coming to wash my back? Or do I have to kick your ass back to Tampa? I am still your teacher, and your last test was not what I would call 'A' material.”

Jerry put a robe, and walked into the bathroom, when a reflection on the shower cabin showed Philip's body.

“Do you remember a kid named Victor Garcia?” Jerry asked firmly.

Tevez shut the water, and remained naked and wet in silence for a full minute.

“We better go to the other room, this is going to take a while, and lots of explanations, just whatever I will tell you, remember that I love you.”

“I know you were his teacher, and the entire world knows he is a murderer.”

“I didn't want to tell you because it's something I want to forget.”

“I need to know as much as you can tell me about him. Please, it's very important”.

She was so touched by the moment, that still completely naked, dripping water, she walked into the cold air-conditioned bedroom.

“I am cold, please hold me,” she said standing in the middle of the room.

Jerry covered her with a dry robe.

“It's important 'my Love,' I need to know,” Jerry said, pretending to be her boyfriend.

“You never call me 'Love,' this must be really important to you,” she answered reaching behind for his neck, pulling it down for him to kiss hers.

Jerry kissed her neck softly, “Yes, I think it's a matter of life and death.”

“What do you mean?” She looked at him worried.

“I think that a poor innocent man is going to be killed by our judiciary system.”

“C'mon sweetie. I know how much you are into your major, but Victor is guilty as charged, there is no way he didn't do it. Even the DNA matched.”

“I know for a fact he is innocent,” he screamed, while putting his clothes on.

“Honey, the entire nation followed the trial, and trust me, I didn't miss any step. It still hurts to talk about it, besides I avoided discussing with you, because of the crossing

with your father's death. Please let's go to the casino as planned. Let's have fun, when we go to Tampa, we will sit down and discuss the matter properly.”

“I am telling you, he is innocent, and I have no doubts”.

“How do you know that? How can you be so sure,” she demanded.

“Because, I killed Lucy Beth, and I also killed my father,” he confessed out loud, heading for the door, “and now, if you excuse me, I gotta run before an innocent man dies,” and he left the room fast.

She stayed behind in her robe, in silence, confused as to whether to call the police or not.

Jerry was already fleeing through the casino on his way to the Luxor, just next door from the Mandalay where he was staying.

He tried to find back his way to the door, which originally led him there, or something with a 25 on it, but of course, nothing happened. He sat down in the heat of Las Vegas outside the hotel, looking for a solution; then he thought that perhaps Ginger's old whorehouse could still have the door, but forgot about the poker room he once entered.

As he noticed the huge volume of cars being valet parked, he fooled a couple of German tourists, and basically stole their car, and drove off from the city, hoping to remember the road, still featuring the gorgeous red mountains he recalled so vividly.

The right turns didn't come to his memory so easily, and he wasted a good three hours before finally pulling in the right street. Unfortunately, what once was a high-end bordello was now a cheap strip joint, with drunks and low class bums hanging out.

A big sign said “\$25 all-inclusive,” so he walked straight in, sure that the sign was his clue.

Wrong. The bouncers kicked him out for not wanting to pay, and he landed on the dirt outside the place, while an old bum asked him to spare a \$20 for a lap dance.

Jerry went back to the car, and started to drive around, waiting for something to happen, with the idea of getting to Baltimore, in case no doors appeared.

He had no idea as to what direction to take, and as he realized that he was actually driving for the first time, he had no idea how he had learned that at the get go, but also didn't stop to think that cars ran on gas, and the tank was now empty.

The car stopped in the middle of the desert, with night almost coming on. He left the car, and began walking, when he saw a small street leading to some houses. As he entered the street a sign read “Speed limit 25 m.p.h.,” and he was in the circle facing a silent door number “25.”

Meanwhile, Ginger was sitting at a slot machine at the Mandalay Bay casino, and after putting in a \$1 coin, she won \$23,000.

#### Door 25: “Let's get things straight”

That dark circle was always a very scary place, never really a site Jerry wanted to remain in for too long, and he tried to open door “25,” but he couldn't. Then he moved to the other doors, but they started to shrink or move around, making it impossible to reach.

The only one that stood still, besides number “25” was number “1,” with a reddish light coming from underneath. And surprisingly that was the door that opened slightly, releasing the smell of Hell. The odor was unbearable, smoked rubber mixed with a putrid bloody dirt.

In silence, the little devilish dwarf walked out of door number “1,” but then to Jerry's great surprise, an angelic figure showed up, from above, gently landing next to him. The angel touched Jerry on the shoulder and spoke, “Jerry, I know this must all be very confusing, but your journey is almost over, there are things we cannot do yet, but trust your heart, and your soul, because only with time you will heal the past.”

The angel walked away, leaving a few feathers behind.

Meanwhile, the little dwarf had reached Jerry. He was still silent, holding his own hands together, as a minister would do before starting a sermon. The he initiated, with a very calm tone, an amicable approach.

“I hope you understand all I've done so far, it's for your own good. I must teach you the ways of the soul, and make you fully comprehend what is a priority in the life of the spirit. See, your bodies are like containers of a, shall we call it “energy”? We, in the after life, are interested in shaping such energy in order to allow more suitable members of our, shall we call it community?” the dwarf spoke earnestly.

“I am not sure who you are, nor what you are seeking. But, if you are some kind of devil trying to get hold my soul, you can keep on trying, because, you will never get it.” Jerry answered strongly.

The dwarf kept his preaching posture. “I see, and I find your attitude deserving of respect and consideration, but sadly those are matters not for you to decide. This is why I

am here, to remind you who holds the power, and you must comply. See, we have the right to interfere, the others cannot,” the little ugly satanic creature declared.

“Who’s we? And who are the others? What on earth are you talking about?” Jerry started to build up strength.

“Perhaps I must be clearer. Your soul belongs to us, and you are done,” the dwarf replied with satisfaction.

“I belong only to myself and to God, certainly not to you,” Jerry confronted him with pride.

The dwarf gazed at him deeply. “Perhaps, you need a more robust reminder, as I seem to fail at making my point.”

Door “25” slowly began changing, turning into a soccer goal, while the floor slowly grew some grass outstretching in length and, simultaneously, white lines drew themselves forming a soccer field, keeping door “1” on the opposite side. Stands faded in all around, and Jerry found himself in the middle of a very large stadium. The dwarf was now wearing an all-black referee outfit, with a whistle in his mouth.

“Very well, let the match begin,” the dwarf ordered.

Two teams appeared, already sweaty and very well into the game.

“I just want to make a slight change of rule. I proposed that you use your legs instead of a ball, so I advise you to start running.” He laughed blowing his whistle.

The players started to chase Jerry very fast, and he was on the floor after someone kicked his left ankle very strongly.

The dwarf stopped the game. “See what I am talking about, and it's just gonna get worse.” He blew his whistle to let the game start again.

Jerry was just about regain his balance and strength, when he saw Mark, the Irish champion, delivering a Kung-Fu style move right below his knee, fracturing all that was there, and Jerry literally collapsed in pain.

The whistle was continuous and annoying, while screaming fans were cheering Mark for the great kick, and Jerry couldn't bear them, immobilized by the pain. Then he passed out.

The dwarf looked at his watch. "Well, 26 seconds, perfect timing." He drew a rectangle in the air and a door materialized in front of his eyes, then snapped his fingers, and the circle turned black in its original set. The door he just drew, featured a "26" on it, but as soon as he touched it, he felt an electric shock, which threw him back several feet.

The door started whitening, and changed its texture, from wood into some kind of living material that seemed to be made of many moving parts. The dwarf went back to the door, only to realize that it was now indeed made of white feathers, and in terror he ran away leaving Jerry on the floor passed out. The door was candid and alive, like the wing of an angel.

#### DOOR 26: "Let him rest"

"It has been a very long journey for him, and he needs additional strength to face the biggest challenge. It could be something very emotional, and yet extremely dangerous," a voice spoke from behind the door.

"Only the true spirit of an innocent soul can face its own identity, and Jerry has

proven so far that he has integrity and willpower.” Another voice replied.

“Indeed, he has proven that he carries the qualities, but he still failed door number '1,' and that must be taken in consideration.”

“True, but In his defense, we must acknowledge the circumstances.”

“A clean soul would have passed those tests, and he didn't.”

“He didn't know any better.”

“We shall see about that. We shall see.”

The mysterious voices slowly faded out, and so did the feathers, revealing the backs of two angels, who flew away, leaving the door in its original wooden look.

Jerry was still passed out, while the door opened slightly, and two eyes came out of it. Bright blue eyes, shining in the dark.

“Dear boy, you suffered so much, be strong, for you are almost there.” A candid female voice said, while the eyes went back inside the door.

The door remained wide open while inside, an old office lit up, grayish with old style neon lights and metal leatherette furniture from the 60's. A gentleman was sitting at the desk, with a silken blue tie on a white shirt, and dark pants held by red suspenders. Perfectly shaved, his hair combed back, and held together by gel. The man had a sleek look, and appeared in full control of his actions. The blue jacket rested on the back of his chair, revealing a brand new cigar in his upper pocket. The office was very noisy, almost as if it were in some factory with heavy machinery.

The loud sound of the production woke Jerry up, who still lacking his full strength, tried to stand repeatedly, but kept on falling. He truly wanted to enter the door, reaching out for that man, who although several years younger, was definitely his father.



“Dad,” Jerry screamed. The man could not hear him, but Jerry was capable of listening very well.

A secretary in her late forties entered from a side door, with a stack of papers.

“So, are you anxious?” She asked excitedly.

“This waiting is killing me, I expect the call from the hospital at any time. Rachel is there already with her mom,” he replied.

“And shouldn't you be there as well? What are you doing at work? It is your first child, the office can wait a couple of days. Go.” She said firmly.

“I must finish reviewing this last contract, then I am on my way. I promise.”

Jerry tried once again to enter the door, but there was some kind of plastic see-through film in the way that felt like rubber to the touch, making it impossible to walk in.

A chair appeared right behind Jerry, and hit him on the calves, forcing him to sit down and watch what started to feel like a movie projected from the inside against the mysterious matter. Jerry sat, concentrating on his father on what clearly was the day of his birth.

March 26th, 1968 the desk calendar proved Jerry right.

His father put his pen down, placed his hand on his forehead, then slowly made the sign of the cross, and, intrigued, looked towards the door, almost as if he had noticed Jerry sitting on the other side. Moments went by that seemed long hours, his glance remained firm, and Jerry felt that he could finally walk in and hug his dad, but as he tried to pass through one more time, his body bumped against the rubber invisible wall, while his father stood up and put on the jacket, fixing his tie, and then walked away, leaving the room empty, and Jerry alone knocking silently trying to get his attention.

Jerry sat on the chair hopeless, with tears coming down, as he felt the need to hug his father and talk with him, seeking some sort of sense in all that was happening to him. But nothing; the room remained empty, just as Jerry's father left it, only with the increasing factory noise.

Jerry looked around, and there was nothing. No doors, absolutely nothing, leaving the overall atmosphere very static.

Door 27: Math will save you.

The distinct sound of a typewriter made its way in, and simultaneously a “ $9+9+9=27$ ” appeared in front of Jerry. The number “27” started blinking when Jerry's father's voice said, “Go on my son, touch it, and don't be afraid.”

Jerry looked around searching for his dad, but there was no trace of him, just the echo of his voice pushing him to stretch out his arm and touch that blinking “27.” As soon as the tip of his finger made contact, the “27” began spinning faster and faster, and Jerry couldn't let go; his hand was stuck to the center of the vortex, blasting now a bright ray of energy. Heat embraced Jerry's body, making him sweat, almost if a sudden fever had hit him. Then slowly the temperature dropped, and his body started to tremble, while the bathroom from the gas station materialized upside down, and the chair was pulled from beneath him, and he was lifted by his feet roughly, until they touched the bathroom floor above, and everything became straight.

Jerry was alone, facing the mirror, and the series of numbers now read “ $6+6+6,$ ”

and he felt the presence of the evil dwarf. A punch in the face knocked him down, just before he could see the typewriter adding “=18.”

Jerry lay on the cold dirty tiles unconscious, until a dense fluid reached his face and woke him up. Still fuzzy, he opened his eyes and saw dark red blood all over. His body was covered with it, and so were his hands, even the hair. He stood up, and instinctively touched himself, to see if he was bleeding. He looked at the mirror, and quickly washed his face. There were no paper towels, and the room was still very cold, so he went to the stalls to take some toilet paper. But what he found inside made him forget the freezing temperature, leaving the water dripping from his chin, mixed with blood. A decapitated female body was sitting on the toilet, reclined against the wall. There was no sign of her head, but fresh blood was still coming out from her neck and soaking the floor.

“Lucy!” Jerry screamed.

Right behind him, in the middle of the bathroom, the dwarf stood up holding Lucy's head by the hair, her blue eyes wide open, and instead of blood, golden liquid was dripping from them.

“I must give you credit. I couldn't have done a better job myself,” the dwarf complimented Jerry. “You are an assassin among the finest,” he continued, dropping the head, which made a heavy sound, shattering the bones against the floor.

“I didn't kill anyone!” Jerry attacked.

“Of course you didn't,” the dwarf answered, morphing into Jerry himself.

Jerry froze, looking at himself, or at least at someone who seemed to be his perfect replica.

“You should have learned by now that everything changes and nothing is what it seems,” the dwarf laughed, kicking Lucy's head like a soccer-ball, while he transformed into Mark, the Irish player. “How is your leg my friend? Or perhaps you want to go back to the brothel and finish that gorgeous girl you left behind? And when I say finish, I don't imply killing her, if you know what I mean?”

Jerry looked around, searching for peace within himself to handle the situation. He was inside the 27th door; hence his journey must be close to an end. He also thought that the worse had happened already, that he was now experiencing the conclusion of something not yet written.

“You think too much my boy,” the captain of the Ginger was now in front of him. “Do you really think that I would let you go unpunished? After you caused the death of my entire crew, and mine too of course. You had to screw that whore ghost, didn't you?”

“So you were playing all these characters,” Jerry asked calmly. “You don't scare me!”

“Oh no! Here it's where you are mistaken, my dear boy,” the dwarf responded, taking on his own appearance again. “All the people you met are very much real, and I never interfered nor took their place. The arrangements with the Big Guy up there wouldn't allow it. Then again, I cannot speak on behalf of all your family members. You humans are capable on your own of generating emotions, dreams, thoughts that are nothing but an ever going source of evil.”

“So why am I here? Why bother making me go through this charade? And why do you bring my family into this?”

“You still don't get it, do you? Do you remember what happened in door number 1?”

“I don't want to think about it,” Jerry screamed, losing the self-control he had retained so

far.

“So, you do remember?”

“It wasn't my fault. You possessed me, I felt a foreign spirit beside mine,” Jerry started crying.

“It's never your fault. All of you always blame others for your actions. Don't get me wrong; I salute what you did, that's why I exist, to make sure you guys choose that kind of path. But, I can't take credit, that foreign spirit, as you call it, it wasn't I.”

“I couldn't control myself, I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't kill her.”

“Hey, no explaining is needed. I am on your side. She caused you a handicapped life, she failed you, and we gave you an opportunity to see what a real life felt like.”

“She failed me? What does Lucy have anything to do with my physical condition?”

“You'll find it out next,” the dwarf responded.

“What's next?” Jerry asked.

“I wait for you to kill yourself, so I can take you to hell. That's what's next.”

A knife, a gun, and a vial of poison appeared on a table next to Jerry.

Jerry looked at the table.

“She was supposed to protect my mother.”

“Of course she was. And instead she made her drunk the night of her wedding, in that cheesy Texan pub she owned, causing the accident that night, and the internal bleeding. Now, after we terminated the bartender, it's time to take care of your mother. She was already pregnant with you, and carelessly thought only of her own pleasure.”

Jerry was crying heavily, and couldn't say a word.

The dwarf got closer to Jerry, “She ran away from her responsibilities, and your

clueless father went along. Then after the accident, they blamed everyone else for your tragic fate.”

“I have to kill her,” Jerry sobbed.

“Just like you did Lucy.”

“But wait a minute? I was here that night, and those weren’t my parents. They were David and Jane on their honeymoon.”

“Well maybe so; but we’ll get to that part later. Now, do you remember what I told in door 1?”

“You told me that that if I’d killed my mother the spell over my life would have been lifted, and that I could live like a normal person.”

“Very well, Jerry, now complete your journey, and free your soul from that body,” the dwarf invited Jerry to look at the table again.”

Jerry took the vial of poison, and drank it at once.

“Ahaha!” The evil laugh of the dwarf welcomed Jerry's decision.

The environment changed, and Jerry returned to his bedroom back in Baltimore. The blue bird with the eyes of a woman was staring at him sleeping in the iron lung. “Too bad you couldn't poison yourself since you are already dead. But now, let's leave your dead body where it belongs, and follow me into your future,” the dwarf said, taking Jerry by hand.

Jerry followed the dwarf into the same path that resembled so much the moments that initiated his journey. The two walked through the bedroom door to find door number “1” standing out in the darkness in front of them. The door was black, with its edges and

knob a very fluorescent red, just like the number “1” in the middle of it. The door was slightly open, and, far from inviting, a light matching the same red came from the inside.

“And now, are you ready to go back, and finish what you started?”

The door opened releasing a very disturbing smell, which made the dwarf turn his face to the other side, but not Jerry, who lifted the neck of his Houston Oilers pajamas and covered his nose before walking in.

Jerry was now inside the “Lucky 7;” no one else was there with the exception of the dwarf that, almost scared, followed in quietly. The smell was still strong, but somehow bearable.

“Why don't you play a song?” Jerry ordered the dwarf.

“Sure, why not? This place needs some action,” the evil little creature said.

A bottle of single malt aged whiskey materialized on the table, and Jerry drank straight from the bottle. The dwarf managed to figure out a way to play the piano, and delighted Jerry with a tune that sounded country.

Jerry began dancing to the improvised notes, and as he looked at the hand holding the bottle, he knew that it wasn't his any longer. His clothes had changed too, and looking into mirror behind the bar he saw that he had changed into the young man with the girl from his first visit to the pub..

“Do you recognize young Lieutenant David from New York? Ahahah! Welcome home,” the dwarf screamed, stopping the music.

“I feel home,” Jerry answered, breaking the bottle against the bar, still holding the half with the neck, now with four sharp pieces of glass sticking out. “Where is she?”

“She is in the car bleeding, just as you left her. I need the fetus she is carrying, bring it to

me,” the dwarf ordered, back in his full power.

To the echo of these words Jerry was catapulted to the bathroom once again as himself, facing the mirror. This time a delicate female voice whispered into his ears, “Remember that you are in door ‘27,’ and that events in door number ‘1’ already occurred. That 6+6+6 you saw earlier does not refer to 666, but to ‘18,’ the door where you and I spoke.” A very bright light heated the room, and Jerry felt warm inside. “This is the moment for you to decide which side you want your soul to be on.”

Jerry returned to the entertaining area of the pub, and to his surprise his young father holding the bottle was now there, and Jerry could feel and see what he was feeling and seeing. Jerry was inside both bodies, and the dwarf, in a distance, feared the power of Mary, and cowardly hid in a corner.

“That whore got pregnant and didn't tell me, and killed our child with her negligence,” the man said. “But I will rip that child out of her womb. I deserved to live and you deserved a better life.”

“What happened?” Jerry asked feeling now separated from the other man, who looked once again like David, but sounded like his father. “Whom am I talking to? Dad? David?” Jerry asked.

“Appearance is often misleading,” the man said, handing the broken bottle to Jerry. “Go out there. You must do it.”

Jerry took the bottle and walked outside the pub, leaving behind the man, with the dwarf still hiding in the corner.

The car was a wreck, smashed against a tree just a few yards from the pub's parking lot. It must be 3 or 4 a.m., with no signs of human beings, or cars in any



direction.

Jerry approached the car, holding the bottle, and the closer he got, the more he could see inside. His mom was unconscious with her head bleeding from hitting the windshield, and her legs stuck underneath the glove department. She had beautiful long blond hair gently resting on her shoulders. Jerry felt weak, and realized that his alter ego was fighting for his life, in that mess of wrecked pieces of metal and shattered glass. The passenger door was open, and Jerry had no particular problem in reaching her. As soon as his hands touched her skin, she opened her eyes.

“Jerry, my son,” she smiled. “Don't worry about me. I'll be fine.”

“No mother. My life will be a living hell because of you,” Jerry said with hatred, holding the bottle firmly.

“You know that I do not approve of such language,” his mother reproached Jerry. “This baby I am carrying is not you, can't you see that I am too young? You were born many years later. This is your unborn older brother.”

At this point the little dwarf started jumping on the hood of the car.

“C'mon, kill her,” he screamed. “She got drunk and into an accident because her selfishness. You took good care of Lucy in door ‘1’ because she gave your mother the alcohol and didn't deserve to live. And now, save your brother from his sufferings, and save yourself from a life of pain. It's all her fault.”

The evil soul of his unborn brother residing in his father body also came out of the pub.

“Yes, finish the whore.”

“I love you and your brother deeply,” his mom said, “and you know that I was never here. We were not drunk nor into an accident. Our only fault was to be too poor to afford

a better life for your brother, and I aborted, and there isn't a single day that I don't regret it. When you were born your father and I were so happy, it was our second chance."

"Or maybe their punishment, forcing them to take care of a handicapped child for what they did to their first child!" The dwarf sentenced.

Jerry's mom took a rosary out of her pocket.

"This is a gift from my father." Jerry recognized the rosary. "I want you to give it to your brother."

Jerry dropped the bottle, and turned to the man now with David's features

"Did you kill Lucy?" Jerry asked.

"You bet I did, using your body. She should've stopped you that night. She is responsible for David's death as much as our mother is responsible for mine."

"David would never hurt a fly. I saw them that night, and I remember Lucy's warning them not to drink."

Jerry took the rosary from the hands of his mother.

"Don't let her fool you," the dwarf intervened. "Your spirit wandered for so long, you are confused, go ahead and avenge your brother here."

"Are you telling me that I've been chasing my unborn brother's soul all along? Why would you send me after him?"

"I sent you to join him. You are connected from that womb; you are more than just siblings. Jerry, your body hosted your brother when he needed it."

"Please stop this. Jerry take your brother's hand, and bring him to me," the mother begged.

Jerry's brother, still in David's body, reluctantly got closer, and as soon their three hands

touched each other, the rosary tied them together.

“I wish you could have been born, and I wish that Jerry could have a normal life; but my love is strong, and know that your father loves you both very much,” she continued.

After she spoke, the spirit left David’s body and took the form of a bright golden flame. The dwarf couldn’t bear the sight and, scared, ran away.

The flame circled around his family a couple of times, and then flew back inside the pub, to return shortly after with another flame of greenish color, and they all knew it was Lucy. The flames stayed for a few seconds, and then together flew to the sky, and beyond.

Jerry's father had regained possession of his body.

“My dear son, know that material life is the twilight in between birth and death. Your soul has been challenged at many levels, and evil forces tried to confuse you, but you were able to find the right path, and help your brother along the way,” the father said this, holding Jerry in his arms. “Your mother and I will still have some of our twilight to experience; but we shall all be reunited once our journey is completed.”

Jerry left his body and entered his mom's, still stuck in the car, while his Baltimore room materialized around him.

The machine slowly stopped pumping Jerry's dead body, and his parents silently held his head.

Jerry was gone, and his soul forever blessed.